From the author of the #1 nationally bestselling WARRIORS series

SURVIVORS

MOON'S CHOICE

SHORT STORY EBOOK EXCLUSIVE!

ERIN HUNTER

SURVIVORS

MOON'S CHOICE

ERIN
HUNTER

HARPER
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Special thanks to Gillian Philip

DEDICATION

For Annie & Fergus Nicol

PACK LIST

MOON'S PACK

ALPHA:

black-and-white male Farm Dog (Moon's Father-Dog)

BETA:

black-and-white female Farm Dog (Moon's Mother-Dog)

HUNTERS:

HUNTER—big gray-and-brown male dog

RUSH—golden brown short-haired male terrier with a short tail

MEADOW—small beige female terrier with dark ears

FLY—brown-and-white, snub-nosed male dog with long legs

PATROL

DOGS:

MOON—black-and-white female Farm Dog

SNAP—small female with tan-and-white fur

MULCH—black long-haired male with long ears

PEBBLE—young black female dog with sleek fur

STAR—black-and-white female Farm Dog, Moon's littermate

OMEGA:

small, black, oddly shaped male with tiny ears and a wrinkled face (also known as Whine)

WILD PACK

ALPHA:

huge half wolf with gray-and-white fur and yellow eyes

BETA:

female red dog with long ears and a feathery tail

HUNTERS:

FIERY—massive brown-and-black male with long ears and shaggy fur

SPRING—female tan chase-dog with black patches

PATROL DOGS:

DART—lean brown-and-white female chase-dog

TWITCH—male tan chase-dog with black patches and a lame foot

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CHAPTER ONE

A soft blue-gray mist hung on the horizon, but the sky above the young dog was clear as it dimmed toward night. Moon watched her namesake Spirit Dog stretch and lope into view. The Moon-Dog was half in shadow, but still she shone bright enough to make a dog mistake the dusk for daylight. A whine of anticipation rose in Moon's throat as she gazed up at her.

Just now the Pack members were going about their last duties of the day: Snap and Mulch were checking the border where a protective thornbush had blown down in the last storm; Whine, the little Omega, was trotting from den to den, renewing the bedding of the more senior dogs. Night had almost fallen, and soon the hunt patrol would return to camp, and the Pack would eat together. Then there might be time to lie contentedly, with a full belly, and talk about the day to her Mother-Dog and Father-Dog.

Moon could hear the two of them behind her in the den, discussing some serious issue about Pack life in low voices. Moon knew that as Alpha and Beta of the Pack, her parent-dogs' duties came first; it would be the same for her, when her time came to be Pack leader. She had to be patient.

She had to be more patient than Star, anyway, she thought with a roll of her blue eyes. Her litter-sister kept bounding up to her, backing off, thrashing her tail, and snapping playfully. She was desperate to entice Moon into a fight-game, but Moon was having none of it. Fight-games were for pups!

"Star, settle down!" she yipped, swiping a gentle paw at her litter-sister's ear.

Star rolled over, pawing the air, snapping at a moth. "Oh, Moon, have some fun while you still can. You won't have any

time to play at *all* once you're Alpha!"

"We're both too old to be playing," Moon told her firmly.

Star scrabbled back upright, sat down, and scratched at one ear. "You're no fun anymore," she said, an edge in her voice.

Moon pinned her ears back, surprised. She had never heard Star sound quite so resentful before. *That's not true! It's just that I'm going to have responsibilities one day. I'll need to be* ready *for them. . . .*

She found that her litter-sister's accusation stung, more than she'd expected. It wasn't that Star was jealous of Moon's destiny as the next Pack-Alpha; Star had no interest in the hard work and duties that would come with leadership, and Moon knew she was happy to be a free spirit. But surely Star realized, now that they were both older, that Moon didn't have the same liberty to mess around and play pointless games, didn't she?

I must learn to be serious and dutiful.

Before she could gnaw at her anxiety any longer, a new sound made Moon's ears prick up. Those were pawsteps, coming toward the camp through the undergrowth—yes, the hunt patrol was returning! The hunt-dogs' shapes became recognizable as they drew closer and emerged from the bushes: Rush and Meadow, the wily terriers; Fly, the brown-and-white snub-nosed dog with the sad but watchful eyes; and in the lead, biggest and strongest of all, was Hunter. Moon felt her heart skip a nervous beat as Hunter's eyes caught hers. He lifted his head slightly with pride; between his strong jaws was a plump and good-sized rabbit.

Moon rose to her paws, ignoring Star's snort of amusement. She dipped her head in solemn greeting, and Hunter gave a low whine of reply in his throat.

He's so well-named, she thought. *He's the strongest dog in the Pack, besides my Father-Dog, and he's the best hunter. I'm glad my parent-dogs chose him for me.*

She sometimes wondered what it was going to be like, running the Pack with Hunter as her Beta. It couldn't be anything but exciting, she decided, with a warm rush of gladness. She ignored the prickle of tension in her neck fur; nervousness and uncertainty were silly. She would be lucky to have such a strong and capable mate. Her parent-dogs had chosen carefully, and they were never wrong about such important Pack matters.

She would go on making her Father-Dog and Mother-Dog proud, and she'd go on showing her gratitude to them and her favor to Hunter. *I don't care what Star thinks about it,* Moon decided a little grumpily. It was true that she didn't feel completely comfortable in Hunter's company—he wasn't the easiest dog to talk to, and he had a stern taciturnity that sometimes bordered on sullenness—but in time, they'd learn to get along. Why, she felt guilty for thinking even the mildest criticism of him; it felt like disloyalty to her parent-dogs. She and Hunter would make a perfect match in the end, she knew it.

Behind Moon, the fir branches rustled as her Father-Dog emerged from the den and shook his fur. He waited expectantly as Hunter padded up to him and dropped the fat rabbit at his forepaws.

"Well done, Hunter! Your day was good, then?"

"It was, Alpha," replied Hunter, lashing his tail from side to side. "Plentiful prey, though some of it was too fast for the rest of the patrol."

It wasn't the first time she'd heard Hunter criticize other dogs in his hunting patrol, but on this occasion Moon was a little startled. Rush and Meadow were very capable stalkers, after all, and long-legged Fly was a swift and agile runner. But as she glanced toward the brown-and-white dog limping up behind Hunter, she noticed he did look stiff and tired. He placed his paws awkwardly, as if he was trying not to stumble, and his eyes seemed much duller than usual.

“Still, you’ve all done a fine job,” Moon’s Father-Dog was saying. He didn’t seem to have noticed the change in Fly’s condition; he was too busy admiring Hunter’s rabbit. “The Pack will eat well tonight.”

Hunter gave his Alpha a nod of acknowledgment and stepped back, his eyes still shining with pride in his catch, but Moon nudged her litter-sister with her shoulder.

“Fly doesn’t look well,” she whispered to Star. “Don’t you think?”

Star cocked her head, frowning at Fly. He was sitting on his haunches now, his noble head drooping. His lolling tongue looked dry and swollen.

“It was a long hunt,” Star muttered uneasily, “so he’s probably just tired. And hungry—he’ll feel better when we’ve all eaten.”

Moon wasn’t so sure, but she put Fly out of her head for the moment as the Pack began to gather for prey-sharing. Alpha and Beta, as was their right, claimed the first share, taking Hunter’s rabbit between them, but there was plenty of other prey for the rest of the dogs. As soon as his leaders had eaten their fill, Hunter paced forward and selected a juicy squirrel for himself. Moon could forgive the arrogant tilt of his head, the aura of satisfaction that surrounded him. After all, he’d done more than any dog to provide this feast. She watched him brightly and approvingly, ignoring any unease she felt at his cockiness.

He’s my future mate. It’s good that he’s strong and confident!

She felt Star’s breath at her ear. “Look at him,” her litter-sister muttered. “Thinks his tail touches the Sky-Dogs. Do you really want to be mated with him?”

It irritated Moon that Star could reawaken all her own uncertainties with a well-placed jibe. “It doesn’t matter,” she growled quietly. “The Pack needs strong leaders, and that’s what Hunter is.”

Star licked her chops and lay down with a sigh, clearly deciding the best policy was to keep her jaws shut. Moon was glad. She could feel her hackles bristling, yet she knew she shouldn’t let Star’s words ruffle her fur. Her sister was talking nonsense, obviously.

All the same, she couldn’t help stealing a glance at her parent-dogs. Now that they’d eaten, and their daily responsibilities were behind them for another night, they were chuffing quietly together over some unheard joke. Alpha muttered something in Beta’s ear, and in playful impatience she batted his nose with a gentle paw.

They had such a connection, thought Moon wistfully. Her Father-Dog and her Mother-Dog were friends as well as mates, companions as well as leaders. They respected each other, worked well together . . .

Against her will, the inner voice and its doubts rose inside her head. Moon clenched her jaws and rubbed her paws over her ears.

If I wasn’t destined to be the Pack’s Alpha . . . would I choose Hunter at all?

CHAPTER TWO

Fly's den was cool, sheltered from the Sun-Dog's rays by overhanging boughs of pine, but the big brown-and-white dog lay listlessly, panting as if the heat was unbearable. Moon nuzzled his dry nose, anxious. His flanks looked hollow and his coat was dull. A crusty discharge oozed from his exhausted eyes.

"Here," she said, trying to sound cheerful as she carefully dragged a curved piece of bark close to his muzzle. Water shimmered in it, cool and enticing, but Fly's nose barely twitched. "I brought you this from the stream. Please, Fly, try to drink some."

Other dogs stood in the sunlit entrance to the den, their tails tucked low with worry. Meadow wriggled through the little group of watchers, a limp weasel in her jaws. Gently she laid it down before the ailing dog, then licked his ear.

"Can't you eat just a little, Fly?"

The brown-and-white dog didn't reply. His nostrils flared slightly at the scent of food, but he seemed unable to even lift his head. His eyes rolled, showing the whites, and his tongue flopped onto the dry earth beneath his muzzle.

"Maybe it was something he ate to start with," Moon murmured to Meadow. "Maybe that's why he can't eat now?"

"But no other dog got sick," said Meadow, looking troubled. "All the prey has been fresh, and there's been nothing we haven't eaten before."

Moon shook herself in distress. "That's true, but—what?" Her ears pricked and she swung her head. "Why are they barking?"

A volley of alarmed yelps echoed around the glade. Tensing, Moon cocked one ear forward.

Meadow gave her a lick. “I don’t know. But if you want to go and look, I’ll stay with Fly.”

Moon ducked out of Fly’s den, past the knot of anxious dogs, and bounded toward the disturbance. Snap, Pebble, and the long-eared black dog Mulch were racing into the camp, their hackles up and fur bristling. Mulch was trembling as he slithered to a halt in the dry leaves.

“Strange dogs,” he barked. “Sniffing around our territory!”

“Where?” Alpha trotted forward, instantly alert.

“Over by the stream,” growled Pebble. “So they’re taking all our water as well.”

Alpha made a low huffing sound. “I doubt they’ll drink it dry, Pebble, but let’s go together as a Pack and see what they’re after. We don’t want trouble if we can help it, but we don’t want a strange Pack muscling in on our territory, either.”

“It could be that they’re just passing through, and needed to drink,” counseled Beta.

“It could,” agreed Alpha. “So let’s play it cool for now. But we should certainly put on a show of strength, just to let them see our land isn’t here for the taking. All dogs in the camp who are not with pup, follow me.”

Her Father-Dog and Mother-Dog were so wise, Moon reflected as she trotted at Alpha’s heels. Alpha was strong enough to defend the Pack, but he wouldn’t place them at risk by picking unnecessary fights. And his mate, her Mother-Dog, was clever and supportive. *Hunter and I can be like that. . . .*

The sky beyond the treetops was heavy with rain, but though the sky was ominous and the clouds dark, it remained dry as the dogs made their way toward the stream. Ahead of Moon, her Father-Dog halted, his tail swishing idly. It was the gesture of a dog who was willing to talk, but who was also sure of his ground and his own strength. Beta moved forward to stand at his side.

The strange Pack stood in front of them, right beside the stream. They were an odd-looking bunch, Moon thought, and there weren't many of them. Her Father-Dog wasn't likely to feel threatened by these interlopers. The one who seemed to be the Alpha was a powerfully built gray creature with yellow eyes—he had more than a touch of wolf blood, if Moon knew anything about those wild, mysterious creatures. At the wolfish dog's side was his Beta, a long-eared, feather-tailed, mean-looking red dog. Close to them was another huge dog, one even bigger than his Alpha: His fur was black and brown, his head heavy and strong and—rather noble, Moon thought. She liked his dark determined eyes, which held no hint of aggression. There were two other black-and-tan dogs, but they were much smaller; Moon thought they looked like littermates. One of them, as he took a limping pace forward, revealed that his foreleg was badly twisted.

Alpha surveyed the newcomers with a stern eye. "Greetings, strangers. What brings you through my Pack's territory?"

The other Alpha didn't answer for a moment. He tilted his head arrogantly, examining the dogs who faced him. He glanced briefly at his Beta, then at his huge black-and-brown Pack-mate with the fierce, kind eyes.

At last he licked his jaws and narrowed his wolfish eyes. "We're not traveling *through* anywhere," he said, with what Moon thought was a deliberate hint of menace. "We are searching for a new territory. This one seems perfect."

Moon heard her Mother-Dog suck in a shocked breath, but her Father-Dog remained calm. His lashing tail, though, grew still. Hunter opened his mouth to speak, but Alpha gave him a stern look, and he fell silent. The strange Alpha began to pace back and forth, displaying his powerfully muscled chest and flanks. His red Beta bared her fangs, the skin of her muzzle wrinkling back to show their deadly sharpness.

Moon could only admire the cool collectedness of her parent-dogs. They were both very still, but their paws remained firmly planted on the ground, and their hackles had risen slightly. The Pack had grown large and strong under their calm, levelheaded leadership, and her Father-Dog never led them into pointless skirmishes. He had always believed that no dog truly won when the blood of others dogs was spilled. Any fight was a last resort.

But that didn't mean he would back down from one. . . .

"This territory is ours." Alpha spoke coolly and steadily. "We have lived here peacefully for many journeys of the Moon-Dog: for three Ice Winds and four Long Light seasons." He gazed meaningfully around the forest surrounding them all. "But large as our Pack is, we don't take more land than we need. There is plenty of good territory beyond ours, and I know you won't have any trouble finding a place to live. Our Pack will certainly not contest your right to land that doesn't belong to us."

The other Alpha's yellow eyes were unreadable, and he moved not a muscle, but his red Beta sprang forward, her teeth still bared.

"We'll take what territory we think best," she snarled. "It's not your Pack's choice, but our own!"

"That's enough, Beta." The wolfish Alpha snapped at her, the clash of his teeth horribly loud in the heavy silence of the trees. The Beta backed off, but she was still bristling. He gave her one warning glare, then turned back to Moon's father.

"I can smell this land," he growled softly. "I can smell the prey that teems through it. Your territory is by far the richest."

Moon glanced anxiously at her Father-Dog, waiting for his response. What the wolfish stranger said was true; their large Pack, whatever the season, always had more than enough food. Alpha looked as if he was thinking hard, but he still didn't rise to the aggression of the newcomers.

But the red Beta could not, it seemed, contain herself any longer. “We will fight you for this land,” she barked, scratching at the earth with her claws. “You have no right to stop us from challenging you, and I don’t think your Alpha has the stomach for a fight!”

“I said, *enough.*” The strange Alpha—who Moon had decided must be at least half wolf—pinned his ears back and bared his teeth, but he didn’t snap at his Beta again. His eyes slanted toward Moon’s father, a sharp and cunning light in them. “Beta is impulsive, but what she says is, of course, true. We have the right by Forest Law to challenge you for this land. And if you don’t concede the territory, we are more than willing to fight you for it.”

Moon felt the other members of her Pack drawing closer to her and her parent-dogs. Snap was at her flank, and she heard a low, constant growling from Mulch and Pebble. Hunter bared his fangs.

“Alpha, we’re a peaceful Pack,” snarled Rush, “but I don’t like these dogs trying to push us around.”

“I agree,” growled Snap. “There are more of us, and this is our territory. Sometimes dogs have to fight for what’s theirs, Alpha.”

“Don’t worry.” Alpha spoke through clenched fangs. “I don’t want a battle with these dogs, but if they ask for it, we’ll happily give them one.”

A chill of excitement and fear swept through Moon’s fur as she felt her own hackles rise in anticipation of the fight. Bunching her shoulder muscles, she lowered her head and gave a savage growl at the red Beta. All around, her Packmates were drawing together in their battle line, grim with determination.

“Wait!”

It was the voice of the huge black-and-brown dog, who hadn’t so much as growled until now. He paced forward, and dipped his head briefly to his wolfish Alpha.

“If I may speak, Alpha? You told us that our best course would be to take a territory close to this one, and demand that we share the good hunting land in common.”

For a long moment, the half wolf watched him with those cold, frightening yellow eyes. At last he nodded slowly.

“Yes, Fiery. Perhaps I did say that.”

Despite his size, the dog called Fiery lowered his eyes again in respect, and thumped his tail once. “If these dogs are reasonable, Alpha—and they seem to be—they will agree to your terms. I think they will see the wisdom of your plan.”

Moon felt her neck fur lower and her muscles relax as a surge of reluctant admiration went through her. She stared at the big dog. Some of the tension had drained from the atmosphere as the half wolf considered Fiery’s words. Moon realized how clever the big dog had been to cool the confrontation without showing disrespect to either Alpha, and making sure his own leader did not lose face. Now he glanced at both Alphas and cleared his throat politely.

“My Alpha thought that instead of being in direct competition, we could all hunt together and split the prey fairly. That would save both Packs a lot of energy and effort, too.” He nodded at his Packmates. “We have excellent hunt-dogs, but your Pack knows this territory far better. It would be to every dog’s benefit if we work together.”

The half wolf was still fixing him with his unsettling yellow gaze, but at last he growled, “Yes. Fiery’s right. That was my plan.” He swiveled his fierce head back to Moon’s parent-dogs. There was still a light of haughty arrogance in his eyes. “Do you agree to my plan? Or shall we fight for the land?”

Moon’s Father-Dog did not lower his eyes; he watched the other Alpha coolly. *My Father-Dog knows who averted the fight and devised that plan,* thought Moon with secret pleasure, *and it wasn’t that half wolf!*

“My Pack and I will discuss this,” her father announced calmly. “We’ll make our decision together.”

“I thought I was talking to an Alpha.” There was a sneer on the half wolf’s face, his lips curling back over one corner of his muzzle.

Moon was proud to see that her Father-Dog’s hackles didn’t even stir. He was unruffled as he growled softly, “*As Alpha . . .* I have learned the value of my Pack’s counsel. You will have to be patient while I confer with them.”

Moon couldn’t help glancing back at the big dog Fiery as she withdrew with the rest of the Pack to a hollow between two overhanging willows. She felt a rush of gratitude to him for defusing the conflict, and she found her tail was wagging of its own accord. Embarrassed, she dropped her eyes and turned quickly back to her Pack.

“I’m inclined to try this plan, at least,” murmured Alpha. “That dog Fiery is a smart one.”

“Smarter than his leader,” growled Beta dryly, and Alpha gave her an affectionate lick. “We have a lot of dogs to feed, after all, and this Alpha and his two biggest Packmates look like strong hunters.”

“But they came to challenge us for our territory!” objected Hunter, his ears swiveling toward Alpha in surprise. “Do we really want them living right next to us? Hunting with us?”

“Better to make an alliance with them, surely?” suggested Moon. “They’re aggressive and strong, and I’d rather hunt with them than have to guard our borders against them.”

Hunter bristled at her side, his face rigid with disapproval, but Moon found she didn’t care—especially when Mulch spoke up in her favor:

“Moon’s right,” he yelped. “As long as they don’t enter our territory, this seems to be the best way for both Packs.”

Alpha and Beta exchanged long glances, and Moon waited, quiet and patient. She knew it was their way of consulting each other; the two were so close, a glance could

say everything. *I can't imagine it being that way between me and Hunter,* she thought wistfully.

But you never know, she reminded herself. *One day we could very well have a connection like my parent-dogs!*

"Very well." Alpha shook his coat, then lashed his tail as he turned back to the strange Pack. "We agree to this plan. Our hunt-dogs will come to this place next sunup, and yours can meet them here."

The half wolf gave a complacent dip of his head, twitching an ear as if slightly amused. "Good. It's settled. We meet at sunup."

As he began to stalk away, his big Packmate Fiery half turned, his dark eyes meeting Moon's. She thought she saw his ears prick forward as his head gave the tiniest of nods.

A thrill ran between her fur and her skin, making her shake herself in unease. Tearing her gaze away from his, she hurried after her Father-Dog and Mother-Dog.

"I like that Fiery," Alpha was telling Beta, as Moon trotted up alongside them. "He advised his Alpha without showing him a grain of disrespect. And his plan was a clever one."

I like him too, Moon realized, picking up her paws more jauntily. *He does seem clever. And gentle. And kind.*

And their Packs were going to hunt together. . . .

Perhaps Fiery and I can be friends. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Groggily, Moon lifted her head. The air against her hide was cold and very still, and only a faint light filtered into the den—she could tell that it was early, and the Sun-Dog had not yet stretched and risen. But *something* had woken her. . . .

Alarmed, Moon glanced at her sister. Star was curled up close by, her sides trembling, and despite the chilly air, Moon could feel the heat of her body. When she touched Star's flank gently with her nose, the burning intensity of it shocked her. Star's eyes were almost closed, but she gave a tiny hoarse whimper.

"Star!" Moon sprang to all four paws and bent her head urgently to her litter-sister. "Star!"

Again that awful plaintive whine came from her litter-sister's throat, but it seemed Star couldn't even raise her head, much less respond to Moon's frantic licking.

She's caught Fly's sickness, Moon realized with a plummeting sense of dread. *But Star seems much worse than he did yesterday. This has come on so quickly!*

"Star, I'll get help. Wait here!" She realized as soon as she said it how ridiculous that sounded; Star was clearly incapable of moving a hind leg, and her desperate breathing was shallow and wheezy.

Fear squeezed Moon's lungs as she bounded out through the den entrance and raced to her parent-dogs' den. Her paws skidded, sending up sprays of loose earth and leaves as she plunged into the dimness.

"Mother-Dog!" As she caught her breath, she remembered she wasn't a pup anymore. "Beta! Alpha! It's Star—she is very sick!"

Her Father-Dog turned as her Mother-Dog sprang to her paws. "What, Moon?" he growled. "How sick?"

“Very,” she panted. “Worse than Fly yesterday.”

Beta hurried out past Moon, her eyes sparking with anxiety. As Moon followed, her heart beating hard, she realized her frantic barking had roused many of the other dogs. They were emerging from their dens, their fur bristling, their expressions bewildered and worried. Snap came bounding over, Omega at her heels, and nosed in concern at the den entrance as Beta and Moon squirmed inside.

Moon wished she could calm her heart. The blood pounding in her ears felt almost painful as she waited for her Mother-Dog’s verdict. Beta was nuzzling Star, who shivered where she lay curled on the den floor. Alpha stood at Moon’s shoulder, and she was glad to feel his reassuring solid warmth at her side.

“It’s all right, Moon,” said Beta at last, giving Star’s ear a last gentle lick. “She has a sickness, but I’ve seen it before. It looks terrible and it’s frightening, but dogs always recover from it.”

“But she’s so hot,” exclaimed Moon, looking from her Mother-Dog to Star and back. “And her breathing is so bad. . . .”

“Yes,” Alpha soothed her, “but Star’s young and strong, like Fly. They’ll both get better, I promise.”

“Your Father-Dog is right.” Beta padded back to Moon and nuzzled her neck. “This invisible enemy strikes sometimes, but it doesn’t stay forever. It hurts dogs, but it won’t kill them.”

“Omega.” Alpha twisted his head to give the little snub-nosed dog a commanding bark. “Please bring water for Star. She mustn’t get thirsty.”

“All right, Alpha.” Omega almost rolled his eyes; Moon was sure of it. She’d never liked him.

“And bring more for Fly, too,” added Alpha sternly. “Keep watch on these two through the night, Omega. They mustn’t run out of water.”

This time the little dog's sullen grunt was perfectly audible. Moon twitched an ear in annoyance, but Alpha simply stared hard at him until he'd turned and trotted off toward the stream.

Omega's a lazy, bad-tempered little thing, thought Moon resentfully. *But so long as he does his job and looks after Star, I don't care.* She turned once more toward her litter-sister, unable to repress a low whine of anxiety. Star's lolling tongue looked so dry and pale. And this sickness had struck so quickly. . . . "Alpha, are you sure she—"

"She'll be fine, Moon." Beta licked her anxious face. "Now, don't you think we should give your litter-sister some breathing room?"

Moon took a breath to argue, then sighed it out and nodded. If her parent-dogs were calm about this, then surely she had no need to panic. It was only that she was so unused to sickness, and now Star and Fly had both fallen ill within a single exchange of Sun-Dog and Moon-Dog.

But Beta was right. Crowding into the den around Star certainly wouldn't help her. Taking a deep breath, Moon turned and scrambled out of the den mouth, making herself look calm and confident for the circle of dogs who were watching.

Their tails tapped the ground, their ears quivered, and some of them had their hackles raised at the strangeness and anxiety. Moon gave them a soft bark as she looked around.

"It's all right," she told them, with more certainty than she felt. "Star's sick, but it's not serious."

Hurrying between Meadow and Rush, she picked up speed and trotted out of the clearing. She didn't wait to answer any of the Pack's urgent questions. Her skin prickled with frustration, but there didn't seem to be anything she could do. *I know nothing about invisible enemies,* she thought. *I can't even help Star! There has to be something I can do for her, but I just don't know what it is. I don't know!*

All she could do was pad on, barely seeing her surroundings or listening to the morning birdsong. An early mist lay in hollows, and the horizon, when she emerged from the trees, was hazily beautiful, blurred with silver-gray dawn light. But Moon's heart was too heavy for her to take any pleasure in it.

She wasn't even especially aware of what her nose was telling her—so she stopped with a sharp jolt when the scents became too strong to ignore. This was the new Pack's territory; indeed, she'd already crossed the line between their lands. Hesitantly, she bent to sniff at a scent-marked stump. The message in her nostrils was wolfish, and sharp with warning.

Yes, I've come too far. She sighed, and glanced over her shoulder. Better turn back now, then. The last thing her Pack needed now was a quarrel with their new neighbors.

But as Moon twisted to pad back the way she'd come, she heard a bark of greeting. She stiffened automatically, but the voice wasn't hostile.

"Hello!" The big dog Fiery bounded to her side.

"I'm sorry . . ." Moon began, dipping her head. "I didn't mean to—"

"Don't apologize." His tongue lolled. "I was hoping I'd see you again soon."

She stared at him, surprised, and he sat back on his haunches, awkwardly scratching at his ear. The huge, powerful dog looked so embarrassed, Moon's heart melted and she let her own tongue loll, grinning.

"All the same, Fiery, I shouldn't have trespassed. I *am* sorry."

"Don't worry." Fiery looked cheerful again. "What's your name? You know mine, after all."

"I'm Moon." She felt shy all of a sudden, and glanced away, back toward her own camp. When she met his eyes again, Fiery was frowning with concern.

“Is everything all right, Moon? I apologize if I startled you. If I was being too forward, I’ll leave you alone. I don’t want you to be mad at me. If you want me to go—”

She shook her head swiftly. “No! I mean . . . no.” She licked her chops. “I’m worried, that’s all. My sister, Star. She’s sick. Really sick.” She took a shaky breath. “My parent-dogs say it’s going to be all right but . . . I’m worried, Fiery. She got sick so suddenly.”

He didn’t tell her not to be silly, and he didn’t look impatient as she falteringly explained Star’s symptoms. He watched her with concern in his dark eyes, nodding now and again to encourage her to go on.

“It’s the heat in her body that frightens me,” Moon finished. She realized her voice was trembling.

Fiery got to his paws, his tail thumping strongly. “Listen, Moon. You must try not to worry. I know something that can help with the fever, at least. Follow me?”

She hesitated only for a moment, then nodded. She trusted this dog, she realized, without even having to think about it; it was like an extra instinct that she’d only just discovered. As Fiery put his nose to the grass and set off on some unseen trail, she followed him without question.

He reached the edge of a copse of birch, and halted, nodding. “Here, Moon.” Opening his jaws, he tore up a fleshy-leaved plant, roots and all, and laid it down at her forepaws. “My Mother-Dog taught me about this. It’ll help bring the heat down in Star’s body. Get her to chew it.” He turned to tear up more of the plant with his teeth. “And make sure she has plenty of water. That’s important.”

Moon stared down at the plants, and then at Fiery. She opened her jaws to thank him, then realized she didn’t know what to say. Not long ago she’d been filled with despair; now he’d kindled a new hope in her heart, and the day looked different altogether. She could help Star! Strangely, a part of her wanted to butt her head against his neck and nuzzle him in gratitude. But that was ridiculous. She barely knew

the dog! To stop herself from licking his nose, she bent and picked up the plants in her jaws.

"Thank you," she mumbled through them, forcing herself to meet his eyes. "It means—"

"Go on." Fiery nodded. "You'd better get that to your sister."

Without another word—she couldn't think of the right one anyway—she spun on her haunches and raced back to her Pack, and to Star.

CHAPTER FOUR

Whatever happened to that feeling?

It had only been a few journeys of the Sun-Dog since she'd bounded away from Fiery with a new and excited optimism. Now, exhausted, Moon scraped at the earth, digging out clods of it. Every muscle in her body hurt, but it was nothing compared to the pain in her rib cage. It couldn't be her heart, she thought. Her heart had curled up like a sick pup, and died inside her.

I remember the feeling I had then. It was hope, but it's not there anymore. It's gone.

Her paws were clogged and sticky with earth, but the hole seemed deep enough now. She took an exhausted step back, and made herself look at the limp corpse beside her.

Oh, Mother-Dog, you were so wrong.

Mulch and Snap too stopped digging, and watched her. Moon swallowed. Then as gently as she could, she closed her jaws around the body's scruff, and dragged it to the edge of the hole. A tug, and one last jerk of her shoulder muscles, and the body tumbled into the mouth of the Earth-Dog. Moon closed her eyes.

It's only been two journeys of the Sun-Dog since she and Alpha helped me bury poor Star.

Oh Earth-Dog, please take care of her.

Take care of my Mother-Dog.

Moon opened her eyes, but she couldn't bear to look at Beta's lifeless body any longer. Soon there would be nothing but a scar of disturbed earth to show she had ever existed. A scar of earth to go with the others, Moon thought, staring around the glade. Star's grave, close to her Mother-Dog's, and Fly's.

Will there be more? she thought, as grief tightened her throat. *My Father-Dog is sick. Omega is sick. Every other dog is sick with fear. I know there will be more. I can't bear it, but there will be.*

Moon clenched her jaw muscles. She had to bear it. She was Alpha in all but name, until her Father-Dog recovered from this terrible sickness.

And he would recover. He *had* to.

Besides, she berated herself, she was lucky in one way: The strong and reassuring presence of Fiery made a huge difference. Without him, Moon might have curled up in a ball herself, and given up hope. Calm and steady, he organized hunts so that healthy dogs wouldn't go hungry, and he searched out more of the fever plant, bringing jawfuls of it back to Moon's Pack until they had a store of it beneath a cool outcrop of stone.

"It must have come too late for Star and for your Mother-Dog," Fiery had told Moon with sadness. "And this sickness seems to be a very bad one. But at least the leaves can help the other dogs."

It did seem to bring down the heat in the sick dogs' bodies, but Moon doubted that it could heal them now. Fiery's Pack obviously agreed, because they and their Alpha stayed well away from Moon's Pack. Fiery told her the half wolf wasn't very pleased that he was visiting the sick dogs.

"But I won't let you cope with this alone," the huge dog had told her. "I've told my Alpha I can't do that."

Moon was more grateful to him than she could say; but there seemed to be nothing even Fiery could do to save her Pack.

Returning to the present, she looked once more at her Mother-Dog's grave, then shook her head and turned to her companions.

"I can't, Snap," she whined. "I can't bury her."

"It's all right, Moon." Snap gave Mulch a glance, and he nodded.

“We’ll cover her with earth,” the black dog agreed. “Make sure she’s completely with the Earth-Dog. You go on back to the Pack.”

Her paws felt as heavy as river-stones as she padded back to the camp. As she passed the small den where Omega lay, his eyes dull and haggard, Moon pushed her nose in. She couldn’t help thinking it felt like a grave already—the air smelled so *stale*.

“Do you need anything, Omega?” she asked him gently. “Do you have enough water?”

He could barely nod his ugly little head, but she could see that the strip of bark beside him still glimmered with fresh water. There was nothing she could do for now. *Who’d have thought we’d end up caring for our own Omega?* she thought. *And who’d have thought I’d ever feel sorry for that mean little dog?*

She padded on to her Father-Dog’s den. He looked a little more alert than Omega, she thought—but she suspected he was putting on something of a brave show.

“Moon,” he growled hoarsely, propping himself up with difficulty on his forelegs. His ribs jutted out beneath his dull coat, and Moon felt a lump of fear in her throat.

“Father-Dog . . .” she said. “Alpha, is there anything you need?”

“Just one thing at the moment, Moon.” His eyes held hers, and they were very serious. “I need you to lead the Pack.”

Moon gave an involuntary yelp of shock. “No, Alpha! I’m making sure you get healthy again. I haven’t got time to . . . You can’t make decisions like that just now. You’re not well, and—”

“Exactly, Moon. I’m not well. Don’t be scared.” His mouth quirked with fond amusement. “I’ve always known you’ll make a wonderful Pack leader. You’re levelheaded, you have plenty of dog-sense. That’s exactly what the Pack needs right now: a dog who won’t panic or make rash choices. Please, Moon. Do this for me.”

Moon had to pause, breathing rapidly, her heart thumping with anxiety. At last she growled softly, “Yes, Alpha. All right. I’ll do my best.”

“I know you will, Moon.”

She touched her nose to his, and was horrified to feel how hot and dry it was. But there was no time to worry at this moment. Alpha was already turning his head, painfully slowly, to bark as well as he could.

“My Pack, to me! All dogs who are not sick, come to my den.”

His head flopped back as Moon heard the sound of dogs approaching: the rustle of grass, the pad of paws on hard earth, the rapid panting of fearful Packmates. With a huge effort, Alpha stumbled to his paws, and with Moon supporting his flank, lurched unsteadily to the den entrance.

The Pack’s eyes, Moon noticed, were bright with fear and uncertainty as they gazed desperately at their Alpha. *My Father-Dog is right,* she realized. *They need to be led, now more than ever.*

“Packmates, hear me.” Alpha’s voice was weak, but in the silence it rang out clearly enough. “For now, I am not able to lead you as I should. My daughter Moon will take my place while we fight this invisible enemy. I ask you all to follow and obey her as you would me. And to give her your wisest counsel, too.”

For long moments there was a tense silence. Then, one by one, dogs began to yip their support.

“Whatever you ask, Alpha,” growled Pebble.

“Moon is our Alpha until you recover,” added Mulch.

“We follow Moon,” barked Snap. “She represents you.”

Moon watched them all, relieved and pleased at their support. She stepped forward, fighting down her nervousness.

“Packmates, I want us all to howl together,” she told them. “We’ll howl for those we have lost.” *My Mother-Dog,* she thought sadly, *and Star. I should howl for them. But*

that's not the most important thing. . . . "And we will ask the Spirit Dogs to guide us, and heal our Packmates. We'll offer them a Great Howl, to ask for strength and health for our Pack."

The dogs formed a circle, and Moon helped her Father-Dog to limp out of his den. She sat close to him, supporting his weak body as the dogs tilted their heads and began to sing out their howls. As the sound rose around her, filling the air, she felt strength and courage seeping back into her.

We've survived many things, she thought, as hope stirred again in her heart. *Surely our Pack can survive this too—if we stay together.* She redoubled her own howls, crying out to her own spirit, the Moon-Dog, even though she was not visible in the morning sky. *She'll hear me, I know she will. She always has.*

As the Howl faded, and dogs shook themselves and turned slowly away to go about their business, her Father-Dog turned to her, and gave Moon a weak lick.

"I knew I was right," he murmured. "Your first act as leader was to bring the Pack together. Well done, Moon."

Her fears began to dissolve in a warm glow of pride. "Thank you, Alpha. I'll do everything I can to lead this Pack back to strength."

But I can't do it alone, she realized, *and I shouldn't! That's what Pack is, after all.*

With the glow of the Great Howl still in her bones, she trotted toward the hunters' den. For the first time, she understood the wisdom of her parent-dogs in choosing Hunter as her intended mate. *I need him now*. *Hunter loves to lead. He can handle the organization of hunting and patrolling while I tend to the sick dogs.*

Now, at last, we'll learn to be a team!

Hunter was sitting with Rush and Meadow, just outside the hunters' den, and as he glanced toward her, Moon realized again, with a flush of pride and admiration, how strong he

was. She wagged her tail as she approached, and opened her jaws to make her suggestion.

Before she could speak, Hunter had gotten to his paws. His expression, as he stared at her, was less than welcoming, and for a moment Moon faltered.

“Moon,” he said. “You should be the first to know. Rush, Meadow, and I are leaving the Pack.”

Her carefully prepared words caught in her throat. Moon could only gape at him. “What?”

“It’s the smart choice,” Hunter’s voice was cool and unapologetic. “Don’t you see? It would be stupid to stick around here and get sick ourselves. We’re going to make a new Pack, a strong one, with healthy Packmates. We want you with us, Moon. We’ll be Alpha and Beta, you and I: just as we were meant to be. We’ll lead a strong and vigorous Pack without sickness.”

Moon wanted to speak, to bark her fury at him, but her throat was too tight with disbelieving shock. Disgust rippled through her muscles, and made her stomach turn over.

At last she managed to choke it out: “You want to abandon the Pack when it needs you most?”

He hunched his powerful shoulders. “It’s not a Pack anymore. It’s too weak to survive.”

Her world was whirling, her brain dizzy with confusion. This didn’t make sense!

“You’ll even turn your back on my Father-Dog, who promoted you, who was so kind to you?” Moon’s bark was hoarse with fury. “I won’t leave with you, Hunter. I’ll stay where I belong. I will never, *never* abandon my Pack!”

Hunter stared at her for a moment, and she hoped against hope that her words had struck home. Surely he couldn’t deny the law of the Pack and the will of the Spirit Dogs? Surely he’d realize he was wrong, see his mistake, change his mind!

But Hunter only turned with a dismissive flick of his tail.

“Then you’re a stupid dog,” he said coldly. “You’ll sicken and die with the others, Moon. Rush, Meadow, and I will live and be strong. Good-bye, Moon, and good luck. Luck’s all you’ve got left to help you now.”

And with that last contemptuous growl, he turned and walked away.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Sun-Dog was yawning and settling on the horizon in a blaze of gold as Moon waited for the hunting patrol to return the following day. The beauty of his colors was altogether at odds with her mood. The golden Spirit Dog had traveled a full day's journey since Hunter, Rush, and Meadow had abandoned the Pack. *How could the Sun-Dog let them do this to us?* Sometimes Moon wondered if he even cared about the mortal dogs dashing around on the ground beneath him, struggling to survive in a harsh world.

No, of course he cares, she told herself firmly. *And we have the help of the other Pack; that counts for so much. My Father-Dog was wise to make a hunting alliance with the half wolf.*

She saw that more clearly than ever. After all, her own Pack had now lost every one of its hunt-dogs, whether to sickness, exhaustion or—worst of all—betrayal.

Mulch had fallen ill only yesterday. Snap, Pebble, and Moon herself were all healthy so far, but all their time and energy went toward tending to the dogs who were sick and helpless.

Moon was sure the half wolf was none too pleased to be propping up an ailing Pack, but so far, their agreement had stood. And that was thanks to Fiery, she realized. He came to their camp every day with fresh prey for the sick dogs. Without his help, Moon knew they wouldn't even have lasted this long.

A twig cracked, and low branches rustled in the line of trees ahead. Eagerly, Moon took a pace forward, hoping to catch her first sight of the returning hunters. If only they'd found good prey today . . .

Her ears twitched and she let out an involuntary growl. Those pawsteps were too light to be the hunting dogs. They were quick and surreptitious, and there seemed to be too many of them. . . .

“Smell dogsies? Sick dogsies!”

“Ohhh, we does, cohort, we does!”

The nasal voices were filled with venom, and Moon’s blood ran ice cold in her veins.

Coyotes!

They burst from the trees not two rabbit-chases from her flank: wiry, quick, and savage. For a horrible instant Moon couldn’t move; she could only stare in horror, trying to count their grayish-yellow pelts. How many? Ten, twelve?

Too many!

Coyotes were spiteful and vicious. They preyed on the weak, and there were a *lot* of weak dogs in the camp behind her. The coyotes were piling toward the glade now, a tumbling mass of murderous teeth and claws. Wrinkled muzzles snuffling the air, slobber flying from their hungry jaws, they hurtled straight for the dens where the sick dogs lay.

Moon whipped around and raced to intercept them, flinging herself into the path of the leaders. She stiffened her shoulders and lowered her head, snarling, as they slithered to a halt in front of her.

“Back off! Get away!” She bared her teeth.

“Ha! Ha! No! Dogsie run now, dogsie live!” The first coyote lunged for her throat, and she could only dodge back, snapping wildly with her own jaws.

“Snap!” she barked, gasping in air between each desperate bite. “Pebble! Help!”

She couldn’t turn to see her friends come racing from their dens, but she heard their pounding paws and their snarling barks. The two dogs appeared on either side of her, biting and clawing at the coyotes, but Moon’s relief was

short-lived. *There are only three of us. We'll never hold them off!*

A yellow flash caught the edge of her vision and she twisted, sinking her jaws into a scrawny neck. But as she flung that coyote away, another leaped and bit her shoulder hard. Moon yelped, lashing at it with her claws. Beside her, Snap was thrusting violently at a coyote's belly with her hindlegs as another struggled to hold her down.

Moon's sight was blurred with blood, and her lungs felt like they were on fire. She had never fought like this before. There was no time to catch a good lungful of air, or plan a clever tactic. She could only bite and scratch and snarl, flailing wildly at each new enemy that piled on. Her Father-Dog had rarely led the Pack into battle, and then only when he had no other choice. And, while Moon was accustomed to the dog-on-dog challenges for rank within the Pack, those duels were fought with honor. There was no honor here—only a vicious, mindless struggle to kill or be killed.

The coyote that had wounded her shoulder was back; she saw his yellow eyes just before he sank his fangs into her upper foreleg. Yanking herself clumsily from his jaws, she felt her flesh rip, and the trickle of warm blood; she clamped her own teeth on his spine and tossed him weakly aside, but the damage was done. When she lunged for him again, her leg faltered under her, and she stumbled, almost crashing to the ground.

If I fall, they'll kill me.

The realization hit her with a cold, sickening certainty. She could make out Pebble, a few tail-lengths away, and the cruel gash in the black dog's side. Blood was gushing from it in frightening quantities. Snap was almost hidden beneath a pile of coyotes, fighting desperately but gradually subsiding under their numbers. Once the three of them were dead, Moon realized, the coyotes would be free to kill every dog in the camp.

My Pack is dying. My Pack is dying!

“You! Coyote *vermin!*”

Gasping, Moon turned. The furious bark came from her Father-Dog’s den. Alpha was standing at its entrance, his leg muscles trembling with the effort, but his muzzle was peeled back to show his fangs. For a moment the coyotes paused, glancing up nervously, and one tumbled off Snap’s back.

“You want easy prey?” Alpha barked savagely. “Take me!”

“No!” barked Moon in terror, but the coyotes had already turned to fly at him. Alpha spun and ran, plunging weakly away from the den with at least eight of the coyotes snapping at his heels.

He could barely put one paw in front of the other, and as he lurched and stumbled into a gap between two pines, the coyotes were on him. Teeth flashed and claws raked as they dragged him to the ground.

“Father-Dog!” howled Moon. She bolted toward him, but two of the coyotes had held back, and now they barred her way. They lowered their heads threateningly, lashing their tails and growling their hate.

“Silly dogsy, wait!”

“Yes. We kills Daddy first. You waits your turn, heh!”

Furious, Moon flew at them, but they were fast and strong, and not nearly as tired as she was. Bite and scratch as she might, she could not fling them off and get past. *Father-Dog! My Alpha!*

Pain seared her ear as coyote teeth ripped it. She felt the weight of one of them thud onto her back, and then the rake of its claws in her side, but she could barely focus. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from her Father-Dog, motionless now beneath a turmoil of vicious coyotes. There was blood on the ground beneath him. *So much blood.*

And then, quite suddenly, the coyotes were backing away from him, yipping with glee. Alpha did not stir as one of them turned its back and contemptuously kicked soil over his blood-soaked body. Moon, pressed to the ground with a

coyote’s teeth in her scruff, could not even bark to her Father-Dog; she could only stare in grief-stricken horror as the pack of brutes turned to trot toward the dens of the sick dogs.

The coyote who held her down wasn’t even fighting her anymore, sure that she was securely pinned. She heard its rasping, nasal voice through her own flesh and fur.

“Heh. Dogsy. Youse can watch. Watches first, then dies.”

Moon closed her eyes in despair. *I don’t want to see my Pack die.*

She flared her nostrils, trying to smell the forest through the stench of blood. *There it is.* There was almost a feeling of peace as she made out the scents of pine needles, blowing branches, skittering prey. The breeze was smoky with a hint of Red Leaf.

A wild yelping rose from the dens where the sick dogs lay. *They can smell the coyotes approaching. I don’t want to hear it happen. Focus on the forest. . . .*

Moon squeezed her eyes tighter shut. She could smell the rich dark soil, the soil that the Earth-Dog nourished with the bodies of dogs. *It’s all right. It’s all right. I’ll go to the Earth-Dog. I’ll see my family.*

A new scent drifted into her nostrils, and her breath caught in her throat. Not the Earth-Dog. A mortal dog, one made of flesh and blood—

Fiery!

She blinked her eyes wide open, just in time to see the big dog himself burst through the tree line into the camp. There were two other dogs at his flanks: the black-and-tan chase-dogs who looked so like each other, Twitch and Spring. All three were howling furiously, their teeth bared in deadly rage as they flung themselves at the coyotes.

The coyotes erupted into panic. Moon felt the teeth of her attacker loosen on her neck, just in time for Fiery to grab its head in his huge jaws. He flung the creature aside; it slammed into a trunk and collapsed lifeless to the ground.

Fiery didn’t wait to make sure it was dead; he turned on the other coyote that tormented Moon, lashing his claws across its face. Moon knew from the spray of blood that he’d blinded it. It took him only moments to finish it off.

“Fiery!” she gasped, clawing her way out from beneath the coyote’s broken body. “The others. My Packmates in the dens. They’re sick and helpless!”

He gave her cheek one quick, reassuring lick, and then was gone, plunging toward the dens. Moon was too weak and exhausted to lift her head, but she heard the clamor of panicked coyotes, the squeals and howls as they died, the enraged growls of Fiery and the barking of Twitch and Spring as they followed him and tore into the attackers.

She saw two coyotes flee, limping, into the forest, but she couldn’t chase them. As the racket faded and the glade became still, Moon dragged herself by her foreclaws toward the motionless corpse of her Father-Dog.

She staggered up onto her paws, but she couldn’t take a step toward Alpha. Her body felt empty, her heart shriveled to nothing.

My sister, my Mother-Dog, my Father-Dog. My friends. My Packmates. Five journeys of the Sun-Dog, and I’ve lost them all.

Moon slumped sideways, tipped back her head and released a terrible, ringing howl of grief and loss.

CHAPTER SIX

The den was dark, and it felt so cold. There was no warm body close to hers. *Where is Star?*

As she woke, blinking, Moon felt her body instantly erupt into violent shivering. She shook her head. It felt fuzzy and thick, as if it were full of black storm clouds. She couldn't think straight. She wished she could stop shuddering.

I know where Star is. And my parent-dogs. Her gut turned over. *That's why I feel so terrible. It's grief.*

There was a movement at the den entrance. Snap's muzzle poked inquisitively in, twitching at the stale air.

"Moon?" The Patrol Dog took a few steps into the dimness of the den. "I came to make sure you're all right. I'm so sorry about Alpha. About everything."

Moon opened her jaws to tell Snap she was fine, she'd be all right, she would lead the Pack as best she could. But all that came out was a weak, trembling growl.

"Moon?" There was urgency in Snap's voice now as she lowered her head to touch Moon's nose with her own. Pulling back, she whined in dismay. "Moon, you're boiling hot! You're sick!"

"I'm not hot," Moon croaked. "I'm cold, Snap. So cold."

As soon as she said it, though, she felt a wave of heat, oppressive and unbearable. *I'm on fire. My blood, my hide, everything.* Her jaws fell open and her tongue lolled.

"Pebble is sick, too." Snap's dark eyes were terrified. "Her wounds from yesterday aren't helping."

Moon made a huge attempt to focus her thoughts, to clear the sticky fog in her head. She knew what Snap was thinking, and why her voice reeked of despair: *She's wondering how she can possibly take care of us all. She doesn't know how to cope. . . .*

It was strange, thought Moon, but she herself felt very calm. She remembered the terrible battle yesterday: the moment when she had caught the scent of the Earth-Dog, and had known she was going to join her. Perhaps the worst had happened now, and she was no longer capable of being scared.

Or perhaps it's just the sickness, killing me bit by bit. . . .

It was so hard to care. "Snap," she whispered. "Get some of those leaves. Fiery's plants. For Pebble and me. To chew."

Snap seemed to be relieved to have something—anything—to do. Turning on her haunches, she scrabbled out of the den and raced away. Moon sank back onto her now dirty bed of leaves.

It's the end of my Pack. We weren't killed by those coyotes. We've been destroyed by an enemy we couldn't even see.

Maybe, Moon thought regretfully, she should have gone with Hunter after all. What use had it been, staying with the sick Pack out of loyalty? It had done her no good. It hadn't helped Snap or Pebble. It hadn't even helped the ones who'd been sick in the first place.

Perhaps we should have gone while we could. We'd have saved what was left of our Pack. Was I foolish not to go with Hunter and the others?

Moon closed her eyes, feeling nothing but a heavy sadness. Her head swam dizzily, and for a moment she thought her mind had drifted loose from her body.

I'm hallucinating, she thought, gazing dully at her Father-Dog. Her Mother-Dog stood at his flank, and Star beside her.

Pack is everything, Moon. Her Father-Dog looked at her kindly. *Pack is sticking together. Pack is taking care of every dog. A Pack abandons no dog.*

Her Mother-Dog stepped forward, touching Moon's ear with her nose. *If you had left the others to suffer, Moon, you would not have been a Pack Dog at all.*

“Mother-Dog . . .” The sound of her own hoarse voice made Moon blink her eyes open. They felt sticky and sore and hot, and she narrowed them against the sting of the faint light.

There was no sign of Alpha, or Beta, or Star. But another dog stood over her, gently licking her neck fur. A big, reassuring, black-and-brown presence.

“Fiery?” she whispered.

“Don’t try to talk, Moon. Here. You must try to chew these leaves. And drink. You must drink this water, it’s important.”

She felt Fiery’s strong nose under her foreleg, coaxing and nudging her until she was half upright. Her body swayed groggily on her forepaws, but she tried to sniff at the withered leaves.

Her stomach roiled. “I can’t.” The water looked unappetizing, even though thirst was raging in her mouth and throat.

“But you must.” He nudged her again, and pulled the curved bark a little closer with his teeth. Water gleamed in it.

“I’m not thirsty.” She flopped down onto her side.

“You are, Moon. And you must chew the leaves.” His gentle voice was insistent. *Oh, why can’t he leave me alone?*

“ . . . Leave me alone,” she echoed the voice in her head.

“No, Moon, I can’t do that.” Fiery’s tongue caressed her cheekbone. “It doesn’t matter if you don’t feel like eating or drinking. You have to do it. For your Pack.”

Moon blinked. She remembered imagining her family. Star and Beta and Alpha, all standing together. *Pack is everything, Moon.*

Every muscle and bone in her body hurt as she hauled herself up again. She sniffed at the water, then touched her tongue to it.

At once she realized how thirsty she really was. She lapped desperately, weakly, but the clear cold water

slipping down her throat felt like a gift from the Sky-Dogs.

"Good," murmured Fiery. "Now, the leaves. Just one—you can do it, Moon."

In fact she managed to chew and swallow three of the dried-up leaves before she flopped down again in exhaustion. "I can't eat any more, Fiery."

"That's all right. You've done great. They'll help you, Moon, I promise." His tongue licked her ear, gently and rhythmically, soothing her. "There's something else that will help, too. You must sleep now."

She couldn't answer him; her mind felt as weary as her body. Closing her eyes, she let herself go limp. The last thing she felt, before darkness enveloped her, was Fiery's warm flank touching hers as he lay down beside her.

It was a good place. A cool, dark place, one without pain. *Time here means nothing. I think I'll stay. . . .*

She didn't want to swim up from the comforting depths of sleep, but Fiery made her do it. She felt his tongue licking her; heard his low voice urging her back to wakefulness.

Moon whined in protest as the pain returned, but he was insistent. Another drink, another mouthful of leaves, and he soothed her to sleep again. "Well done, Moon. Your Pack needs this. Now sleep."

But you won't let *me sleep,* she thought miserably as he nuzzled her awake yet again. How long had she slept? She didn't know. She remembered only the wildest blur of dreams, but she knew they had been bad ones, and was glad they were only vague memories.

If only he'd let her sleep for more than a few moments. *Is it only that? That's how it feels. . . .*

Time and time again Fiery nudged her awake, coaxing her to drink and to chew the leaves.

"Do it for your Pack, Moon," he'd say, pawing the water closer.

Each time he roused her, she wanted to bite him, but she didn't have the strength. *Don't wake me again, Fiery. Please*

don’t. Let me sleep.

But he wouldn’t. “One more leaf, and I’ll leave you to rest. Just one, Moon. Now the water.”

The last time he woke her, though, she remembered her dream clearly. She’d been in the jaws of the Earth-Dog.

I was in the dark and I didn’t know which way to turn. Terror clutched her heart as she recalled the nightmare. *She was holding me down. She wouldn’t let me go. I couldn’t breathe. . . .*

As Fiery pushed the leaves toward her, sickness rose in her throat, and she knew she couldn’t touch them again. Couldn’t even sniff them. *Never. I’ll die if I have to!*

She was grateful Fiery had woken her from that terrible dream, but thanks were not what spilled out of her aching throat. “Why can’t you leave me alone? I can’t do this, Fiery. I can’t! Leave me *be*!”

The big dog stared into her eyes, which felt puffy and swollen. He swallowed hard, and nudged the leaves even closer. There was fierce determination in his face; but she couldn’t help thinking she saw something else, too, something gentler.

“If you won’t do it for your Pack,” he whispered, “then do it for me. Please, Moon. I couldn’t bear it if you died.”

Her breath rasped in her throat as she stared at him. He was trying to sound stern and bossy, but all she could see in his expression was care, and worry—and affection.

Fiery’s everything a dog should be, she realized with a jolt that made her weak heart race. *I’m not grateful to him, no. It’s not gratitude at all.*

“Come on, Moon,” he murmured. “For me.”

She dipped her muzzle to the water, and lapped feebly.

Fiery is what my parent-dogs thought Hunter was. He’s strong, and brave, and he’s a natural leader.

But he’s much more than that. He’s much more than Hunter ever was. He’s the dog my Pack needed in their worst trouble.

Moon paused in her lapping, and caught Fiery's dark, concerned eyes as he nodded encouragement at her.

He's kind as well as brave. He's gentle as well as strong. And he's something Hunter will never be: He's loyal.

He's not just the dog my Pack needs, she realized with an aching clench of her heart. *He's the dog* I *need. . . .*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Moon's muscles still felt as weak as a pup's, but she grimly kept digging, her claws raking a shallow trench into the soft earth. *I owe it to Pebble. I was lucky, and she wasn't.*

I lived, and Pebble didn't.

So many of my Pack didn't live, she thought with a wrench of grief*. I'm lucky. Because the Sky-Dogs blessed me, and sent Fiery.*

The awful heat and the freezing cold were gone from her bones and muscles. The sickness had passed a day or two ago, leaving her feeble but alive. And the same, it seemed, was true for her whole Pack—what was left of it. Mulch and Omega had recovered, just as she had.

But not Pebble. Moon glanced at the limp body beside the grave, and swallowed hard. The hole Moon, Mulch, and Snap had dug for their Packmate was next to Star's, and close to the places where Alpha and Beta lay. And Fly, too. *At least they'll be together when they meet the Earth-Dog.*

I've lost so much, but what I have left, I owe to Fiery.

She remembered waking that morning, every muscle in her body feeling as if it was made of fragile twigs. But the heat and the sickness and the pain had been gone. It was Fiery who had brought her through the sickness, Fiery who had given her the will to carry on. And it had been Fiery's face she had seen first, his eyes bright with happiness as he realized the danger had passed. He had licked her face, nuzzled her neck, then trotted out into the forest to find her food and fresh water, a spring in his step that she hadn't seen in days.

But when he'd returned, bringing tender chunks of rabbit-haunch and a new bark-segment brimming with spring water—*No more leaves for you, Moon!*—he had sat down

solemnly to watch her eat. And when she'd finally satisfied the hunger cravings that gnawed at her thin stomach, he had broken the news.

"I must leave now, Moon," he'd told her, sorrow in his eyes. "I've neglected my duties to my own Pack for too long . . . I'm sorry."

She'd wanted to protest, wanted to beg him to stay with her for just one more journey of the Sun-Dog—but she couldn't. She understood now, more than ever, that Pack was everything. Fiery had done what he could for Moon—*I owe him my life*—but he had responsibilities that he couldn't ignore any longer.

"I'll miss you," was all she had managed to say.

"I'll come back," he had promised her gravely. "As soon as I can, I'll return and see how you're doing. You and your Pack, of course," he'd added hurriedly, looking a little embarrassed.

Moon was eager for him to return. *When he comes,* she thought, *I won't hesitate, I won't waste time. I'll tell Fiery exactly how I feel.* The thought made her ribs shrink with nervousness, but it had to be done. *I need to thank him properly for what he did. Anyway, I can't just let him go, not now.*

"All right, Moon." Snap interrupted her thoughts gently, bringing her back to the terrible present. "We'd better give Pebble to the Earth-Dog."

Shaking off her reverie, Moon nodded. "Of course." She sighed. "Poor Pebble. I wish she could have made it, too."

Respectfully, Mulch licked the mud from his claws before gripping Pebble's body and rolling it toward the hole. Snap hauled on the black dog's scruff, and Moon pushed, and with just a few hard efforts, Pebble's body rolled and tumbled into its grave, landing with a soft thump. Sorrow stabbed Moon's heart yet again as she gazed down at her dead Packmate. Turning away, she began to scrape soil over the black dog's body.

With her back to the grave, she found she was looking straight at Omega. The little dog sat apart from them, thin and even more wizened than he usually looked. His shoulders were hunched and his eyes were dull and surly. He was still too weak from his illness to help with Pebble's burial, but Moon couldn't help wondering if he was being lazy, too.

I mustn't think that way. We need to learn to live as a Pack again.

Should she be Alpha to the remnants of their once-proud Pack, she wondered? Were there even enough of them left to count as a proper Pack? Four dogs, only three of whom were decent hunters; how could they survive alone?

Though if the half wolf's Pack remains friendly, and if they help us, I think we can manage. . . .

A big shadow moved in the trees beyond the dogs' graves, padding toward them, and Moon felt her heart swell inside her chest. Letting her tongue loll happily, she trotted to meet him, leaving the others to finish burying Pebble. "Fiery!"

His eyes were warm as they rested on her. "Moon. You look so much better!"

She dipped her head shyly. "Fiery, I wanted to say—"

"Listen," he interrupted urgently, and his gaze grew pained. "I need to say something first." He took a breath and averted his eyes slightly, as if afraid to meet hers. "Moon, my Pack is moving on."

She couldn't help her startled gasp. Why hadn't this possibility occurred to her? A wrench of pain silenced her for a long moment, and Fiery lifted his head to gaze at her again.

"The thing is, Moon . . . I thought . . . if you wanted to, that is . . ." He clenched his jaws determinedly. "I hoped you might want to . . . come with us."

She licked her chops, lost for words. Her gut was heavy with sadness. *He's leaving. . . . But he wants me to go with*

him. . . .

"Fiery," she began, twitching her ears in distress. "I—I can't do it."

"I wish you would."

His face was so kind, his eyes so full of affection. But, she thought, he must know deep down that she couldn't. *He forced me to get better. He fought for my life, and he did it by reminding me how much my Pack matters. He wants me to be with him, but he knows that I can't.*

"I've promised to lead my Pack, Fiery." She lowered her head. "I can't abandon them."

Fiery sighed heavily. "I think I knew that would be your answer, Moon. I know how you feel about your Pack. I know you have a duty to them, and you won't turn your rump on that." His expression became rueful. "But I had to ask you, anyway. Do you understand?"

Oh, yes, she thought. *I understand perfectly, Fiery.* Misery rising in her throat, she met his gaze. "Why do you have to leave?"

"Alpha—my Alpha, that is—he doesn't like staying in a place where there was sickness. He's worried the invisible enemy is still in the air around here, and he thinks staying would be a bad idea. I can't convince him otherwise, I'm sorry." Fiery's tail tapped the ground in agitation. "He wanted to leave before now, Moon; that's the truth. I asked him to stay, so I could care for you, make sure you recovered."

"Oh, Fiery. And you did. You were so kind." She tried to clear the weight in her throat.

"It wasn't really kindness," he said. "But Moon, now that you're better, I have to obey my Alpha."

Moon lay down on her forepaws. She didn't think she could stand upright anymore without wobbling. This was such crushing news, and she was weak already. And this further proof of Fiery's kindness and devotion made her

almost dizzy. “You asked your whole Pack to stay? Just for me?”

“Just for you, Moon,” he said quietly.

She swallowed hard, trying not to let her voice shake. “I wish I could repay you, Fiery. I wish I could do what you want. I wish it more than anything, but I can’t. My family’s gone, and the Pack needs me. This territory—it’s all we have left.”

“That’s what I was afraid you’d say.” He nuzzled her jaw. “But I do understand.”

Moon sat up on her forepaws, her eyes brightening. *Why didn’t I think of it before?* “Fiery, would you consider staying here?” The brashness of her question made her suddenly shy, and she glanced away. “I mean . . . you could stay here. With my Pack, with me. We could lead this Pack, look after them together . . .”

A look of torment crossed the big dog’s noble features. “I can’t. Oh Moon, I’m sorry, but I can’t. You’re bound to your Pack—and I’m bound to my Alpha.”

“The half wolf?” Moon closed her jaws on her next words: *But he’s so . . . arrogant.*

“He found me when I was a pup,” Fiery sighed. “He saved me from a giantfur, and he took me in and cared for me when there was no other dog to do it. I know he seems . . . harsh. But I owe him my life and my loyalty, and I can’t abandon him or my Pack. Oh Moon. It seems we’re both tied by bonds we can’t break.”

Moon swallowed, nodding. Despite her disappointment, Fiery’s loyalty to the half wolf stirred her affection for him even more. *We can’t be together. But that’s no dog’s fault. We both have duties we can’t ignore.*

He’s the dog I was meant to be with, I know that. But it can’t happen. And in a strange way, she loved Fiery even more for it.

“When do you leave?” She could hardly bear to ask.

“Two more journeys of the Sun-Dog, and then we move on,” he told her gently.

She gathered the scraps of her courage. “Will I see you again?”

“We’ll pass through your territory on our way,” he assured her with another lick. “I promise I’ll see you then. And say good-bye.” He hesitated, then met her eyes, his own full of sadness. “I’ll miss you, Moon.”

He turned, his paws heavy as he padded back the way he had come. His head hung low, and as he glanced back once, she saw the longing in his face. Then he vanished into the shadows of the wood.

It’s just as well he walked away, Moon thought. Her heart felt like a stone in her chest, and for long awful moments she couldn’t move. *I don’t think I could have been the one to walk away from him.*

She blinked hard, peering into the darkness of the trees, but he was gone. And after all that had happened, she wasn’t sure she could bear this final awful loss.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“You’ll never guess who I found out there.” Snap’s voice was full of contempt as she trotted into the clearing, tail lashing.

Moon got to her paws. She’d been expecting to see Snap return from her solitary hunt—with so few dogs in the Pack now, there was no team hunting—but it took her aback to see Snap wasn’t alone. There was a dog in the shade behind her, and Moon recognized his burly outline.

Moon’s jaw felt loose, and her heartbeat thudded in her throat. He was the last dog she’d ever wanted to see again. Grimly she gritted her teeth and stiffened her shoulders, pacing forward to face him.

“Hunter,” she greeted him coldly.

“Moon.” His tone was airy. “I’m glad to see that a few of my old Pack managed to survive.”

I must not bite him. Moon held on to her temper. “What brings you back here?”

“It’s as I said. I’m glad to see the four of you escaped the sickness, but you’ve taken very bad losses, haven’t you?”

Moon didn’t answer; she only stared at him.

“So,” he went on, “I realized where my duty lay.”

“A bit late,” growled Snap under her breath, but Moon gave her a glance to quiet her.

“And where does your duty lie *this* time?” asked Moon, with heavy sarcasm.

He hunched his shoulders. “With this Pack, obviously. I’ve returned to lead you.”

Moon looked at Snap, whose jaw was open in disbelief. She stared back at Hunter, but the tilt of his head remained arrogant despite their scorn. “You’re serious?”

“Of course I’m serious.” He tapped his tail impatiently. “I’m stronger than all of you, and a better hunter. You’d be

fools not to jump at the chance."

It was lucky, Moon thought, that Mulch arrived back from patrol at just that moment. Otherwise she really might have bitten Hunter. *How I'd love to take off one of his cocky ears,* she thought bitterly. Mulch was staring at Hunter too, now, and there was no expression of welcome in the black dog's eyes.

I wonder if Hunter expected a slightly more enthusiastic reception, Moon wondered. The thought amused and cheered her, and she managed to take a deep breath and control herself.

"What happened to Rush and Meadow?" she asked.

"Oh, they got sick," said Hunter casually. "I tried to look after them, but they died anyway."

Moon was too flabbergasted by his light tone to answer him, but Mulch spoke up, his voice dry as a rabbit-bone left in the sun.

"That's funny," he growled, and there was an undercurrent of laughter in his tone. "Because guess who I ran into while I was on patrol? Rush and Meadow are looking very well, for 'dead' dogs. You must have taken better care of them than you thought, Hunter."

Hunter opened his jaws. "I—"

"In fact," Mulch interrupted him, "they told me they'd decided to leave *you*. They snuck away in the night because they didn't like being bossed around like pups—and by a dog who's never led a Pack before. I think the words Rush used were . . . let me see . . . *control wolf*."

For a moment Hunter looked lost for words. He swallowed hard, looking furious and embarrassed. Then he licked his chops and drew himself up.

"Well, Moon," he said grandly. He'd obviously decided to pretend Mulch didn't exist. "Your parent-dogs always wanted us to lead the Pack together. Their dearest wish was that we should be mates, and I think we should honor that wish. You can be Beta to my Alpha."

Moon took an angry breath. *Beta to* his *Alpha*? She'd actually been enjoying his obvious discomfort, but now he had riled her beyond belief. Her amusement died, and she felt her hackles rise.

"I value loyalty in a leader," she growled slowly, choosing her words with care. "I value loyalty in a mate. You've shown none. Of course I won't accept you as my mate, Hunter." Her voice rose and she almost spat her anger: "I reject you with every part of my dog-spirit."

His ears tightened against his skull, and Moon caught a glimpse of that vicious light in his eyes, the gleam she'd never noticed when her parent-dogs were alive. "Then you're a fool," he snarled.

My parent-dogs always thought Hunter would be a strong leader, because he was a strong fighter. But I don't think they would choose him now, if they'd witnessed his behavior. Any Pack deserves better.

Moon stiffened her muscles and lashed her tail, hiding her aching heart behind a frosty coldness. "I may be a fool. But I will say this: Snap, Mulch, and Omega are my Packmates, and I am their Alpha, but I do not choose for them. It's possible they think I'm a fool too." She turned to Snap, and nodded. "If you three wish to follow Hunter, I won't try to stop you. He's strong; he's right about that. He'll lead you well." The strength of her voice faltered slightly as her gaze moved to Mulch, and then to Omega. "I'm not interested in ordering dogs around, and you should all have a say in what happens to this Pack. You must make your own choices. I won't follow Hunter—not if he was the last dog left in the world—but if you want to go with him, I won't try to stop you."

The three of them glanced at one another, and Moon couldn't help but hold her breath. *Please don't leave,* she found herself begging them inwardly. *I don't want to be the last of my Pack. I don't want to be alone.*

But she wouldn’t ever say it aloud. She only licked her jaws nervously as Snap stepped forward.

The tan-and-white dog gave Hunter a cool stare. “I too value loyalty in a leader,” she said. “And if my Alpha is true to me, I will give that loyalty back till the day I go to the Earth-Dog.” Snap swept her gaze contemptuously away from Hunter, and looked at Moon with much softer eyes. “I will not follow Hunter, and I won’t submit to him. He’s proven himself a coward and a betrayer. You are my Alpha, Moon.”

Mulch sprang forward to Snap’s side. He didn’t even look at Hunter, but focused his gaze on Moon. “I’m with Snap,” he said. “Everything she says is true. You’re my Alpha, Moon. I follow you, and no other dog, not as long as you want me in your Pack.” For the first time he slanted his eyes at Hunter, who was clenching his teeth in fury. “We’re better off without this false dog.”

Hunter rose to his four paws, trembling as he glared at the squat little Omega, the last dog to make his choice. Omega twisted his already wrinkled muzzle, and his pink tongue darted out to lick his ugly jaws. He looked very uncomfortable—and no wonder, thought Moon, when Hunter was several times bigger than him—but he spoke firmly.

“How could I trust Hunter?” he whined. Backing away from Hunter’s furious eyes, he tucked his tail between his legs, and went on stubbornly. “I couldn’t trust you ever again. You’d abandon me in the flash of a rabbit tail. I’m staying with Moon.”

Moon closed her eyes briefly, feeling a wave of relief and gratitude wash over her. But as Hunter growled, she opened her eyes again and met his gaze steadily.

“You’re pathetic,” he snarled at her. “Choices? Omegas don’t make choices! Hunt-dogs and Patrol Dogs don’t vote for their leaders! Your Pack’s mine for the taking. It’s my right! Your Father-Dog gave me that right. He chose me to be Alpha!”

“He did not,” barked Moon, her fur bristling with anger now. “And if he’d seen how you’ve behaved, how you let down this Pack, you’d be lucky if he made you his Omega! Alphas don’t run away from danger. They stay where they are and protect their Pack!”

“Your Father-Dog wished for *me*—”

“Don’t you dare!” Hunter’s twisting of her Father-Dog’s wishes finally broke Moon’s fragile self-control. She lunged for him, jaws wide and lips peeled back from her fangs, and had the satisfaction of seeing him flinch away. He dodged her attack, but Snap and Mulch flew at him from each side, snapping at his flanks, barking their fury.

Hunter twisted and ducked, barking once in fright. Then, abruptly, he bunched his muscles and leaped past Snap, fleeing for the trees with his tail clamped between his legs. Moon’s teeth closed with a clash, just shy of his rump, but he gave a startled yelp anyway. Even Omega was prancing behind them, watching from safety but urging them on with high-pitched barks, and Snap and Mulch harried Hunter all the way into the trees.

Moon skidded to a halt as they chased the traitor off. Her blood was pounding and her chest heaving, but nothing had given her so much satisfaction in a long time as the sight of Hunter’s fleeing hindquarters. Undergrowth crashed and branches snapped as the panicked dog dived for cover and vanished.

Moon watched Snap and Mulch trot back, eyes shining with glee. She let her tongue loll with merriment. Between Snap’s teeth was a ragged clump of gray-brown rump fur.

CHAPTER NINE

With everything that had happened lately, and with the hard Pack work shared among just four dogs, Moon thought that the one thing she should be able to do was sleep. Instead she fidgeted and shuffled on her bedding, tossing and turning. She would have to have a word with Omega; he hadn't chosen the right leaves. He hadn't arranged the bedding properly. He—

Oh, it's stupid to blame Omega. I know what's keeping me awake.

Fiery is leaving tomorrow.

Stretching out her aching muscles, she staggered up onto her paws. Her head pounded with tiredness, but the thoughts and fears raced around inside it like rats, giving her no respite. *Admit it,* she told herself angrily. *You're not just going to* miss *him. The truth is, you can't bear the thought that you might never see him again.*

Silvery moonlight filtered in through the den entrance, edging the overhanging branches with a pale glow. Soon the Moon-Dog would be full, realized Moon, and what kind of a Great Howl could they offer her with such a small and vulnerable Pack? They wouldn't be crying out their joy to the Moon-Dog; they wouldn't be declaring their strength and togetherness. Their voices would be small and vulnerable, lost in the forest.

The Moon-Dog won't even hear us, she thought in despair.

It wasn't just that her heart ached at the thought of Fiery leaving. Without his strong presence nearby, she and her Pack would be prey to all kinds of threats: coyotes, foxes, hostile dogs. How could they even survive?

I should regret driving Hunter away, but I can't. I'm glad he's gone. I think that he might have been the biggest

threat of all. . . .

All the same, she, Mulch, and Snap were not the biggest and strongest of dogs; and Omega was next to useless in a fight. If they were left undisturbed, perhaps they could struggle on, living from day to day and taking turns to hunt and patrol. But Moon could not imagine a future in which they'd be left alone. The coyotes might want revenge, and those brutes were only one enemy in a forest full of dangers.

Fiery was our protection. With him gone, we'll have no dog to defend us. What kind of an Alpha am I if I can't protect my Pack?

Utterly dejected, Moon padded to the den entrance and sat down, tapping her tail as she gazed up at the three-quarters form of the Moon-Dog. Beyond the camp the nighttime life of the forest was busy; there were scuttlings and rustlings, the lonely shriek of an owl, the distant harsh cry of a fox. Moon shivered as the breeze touched her hide, and a ragged sliver of cloud drifted over the Moon-Dog's face.

Oh, Spirit-Dog of mine. I don't think I'm cut out to be an Alpha.

Here in the darkness and the stillness of the night, she could be honest with herself. She hated giving orders. She hated trying to boss the other dogs around. Most of all, she shuddered at the thought of being responsible for them, the thought of knowing that they relied on her decisions for their safety and happiness.

It's too much. Father-Dog, you were wrong about me. I'm no Alpha. Moon gave a huge, miserable sigh. *I was happy when I was doing my job, obeying your orders. Not now when I'm giving my own, and worrying myself sick about whether I've done the right thing.*

She was distraught to think she was letting her parent-dogs down, but she couldn't help it. *I want to be useful to the Pack in my own way. I know you had hopes and dreams*

for me, Mother-Dog, Father-Dog. But they weren't my dreams. . . .

She didn't even know if she was right to stay in this territory. Did the invisible enemy really linger here, she wondered? The half wolf might be smarter than she'd thought; perhaps it was stupid to remain in a place that harbored sickness. She was so afraid to leave, to walk away from the only home she'd known . . . but was she being a bad Alpha by making her Pack stay in this place?

I don't know—and that's the trouble. I just don't know!

Moon rose to her paws again and padded out into the glade. She paced to one end of it, where Omega lay snoring in his small den, then turned and paced the other way. Back and forth she padded, her mind a turmoil of indecision.

Do I let down my Father-Dog and Mother-Dog?

Or do I risk letting down all that's left of my Pack?

Gray misty light was beginning to outline the trees as the Moon-Dog loped toward the horizon. Moon heaved a sigh, halting in the middle of the clearing. She twitched one ear, hearing Omega mumble and squeak in his sleep.

My Father-Dog is dead, she thought. *My Mother-Dog is dead. But my Packmates are alive. They're alive, and they need me. But they need me to make the right choice.*

I know what I have to do.

On a knoll just beyond the sunup side of the glade, she could make out Mulch's outline; he'd been on guard through the night, and she saw him stretch and yawn. Moon barked softly to him, and he turned.

"Mulch," she said as he approached with his ears quizzically pricked. "Come with me."

She roused the grumbling Omega, and together they padded to Snap's den. Snap was awake and alert immediately, cocking her head.

"What's up, Moon?"

"I need to talk to all of you." Moon sat down. She glanced at the ground, scratched a mark in it with her claw, then

looked up again. Her three Packmates watched her eyes, curious.

"Tell us, Moon." Mulch tilted an ear. "You can ask us anything and we'll follow you. You're our Alpha."

"Yes, I am," she murmured. "And your loyalty means everything to me. But this is something I won't do without your consent. Alpha or not, I won't force you into something you don't want. But I have a proposal to put to you all. . . ."

The grass was damp under their pawpads as the four dogs made their way over the ridge that marked the boundary of their land. Moon paused, her claws touching the line she knew was the border. On the horizon, the Sun-Dog was rousing himself to lope into the sky; his brilliant golden eye blinked over a faraway hill, lighting up the gray dawn landscape with green and gold and pink.

Moon took a breath, gazing out at the shallow expanse of the valley. The clearness of the sky seemed like a good omen; it was a good day to take such a momentous step.

At least, she hoped so. Setting her jaw, Moon took a step over the boundary.

Behind her, Snap, Mulch, and Omega followed, sharing nervous glances. Moon didn't look back at them, though; she had caught the first scent marker on the still air.

"This way," she said, putting all the confidence she could muster into her voice. She trotted determinedly up the slope to the edge of a cleft in the ridge.

There, poised on the highest point and watching the land beyond, was the red Beta. Moon swallowed.

Oh, it had to be her, didn't it? she thought dryly. Shaking herself, she trotted toward the Beta, giving a low friendly bark.

The Beta spun in shock, her face agitated. "You!"

"Beta." Halting, Moon dipped her head respectfully.

"What do you want?" The red dog sounded flustered—as well she might, thought Moon with inward amusement.

She’d been so busy watching the outer territory, she hadn’t seen Moon and her Pack approach from her flank.

“We’re not here to make trouble,” Moon assured her quickly. “I’d like to speak with your Alpha, if I may?” “Why?” asked the Beta sharply. “We’re leaving soon. When the Sun-Dog rises above those trees, we’ll be gone.”

“I know.” Moon made her voice humble. She disliked this dog, but for her Pack’s sake, it was important to show deference. “I only want to talk to your Alpha. I—well, my Pack and I . . . we have a proposal for him. I’d be grateful if you would escort us.”

The Beta looked annoyed, but she could hardly refuse such a polite request. She sat on her haunches, gave her ear a vehement scratch to express her feelings, and then nodded sharply.

“Very well. I’ll take you to Alpha. But don’t waste his time! We have a busy day ahead of us.”

Quietly amused at the Beta’s irritation, Moon followed her down into the valley. The red dog’s tail was raised self-importantly as she led them through a cleft between two rocks. The passage opened into a shallow bowl-shaped glade, where dogs rose to their paws to stare at the newcomers.

Moon ignored their curious mutterings and growls. She kept her focus on the half wolf, who paced arrogantly forward from a rock in the center of the camp. When she dared go no farther, Moon stopped, and dipped her head, lowering her tail.

“What’s the meaning of this?” growled the half wolf, lashing his bushy tail. “Have you come to challenge me for the leadership of my Pack, Moon?”

There was a ripple of amused growling that fell silent as the Alpha gave his Pack a sharp glare.

“No, Alpha.” Moon swallowed, and met his eyes. There was a big, familiar shape at his flank, but Moon couldn’t look

at Fiery. *I mustn't*, she thought. *Though I really, really want to.*

"This dog says she has a proposal for you." The red Beta's tone was sneering.

"Let me hear it, then." Alpha cocked his ears, curling his muzzle just a little.

"Alpha," said Moon quietly, "my Pack is small. We lost so many to the sickness that attacked us."

"There's barely enough of you to count as a Pack," muttered the Beta, but she shut her jaws at a fang-baring from Alpha.

"We're all healthy now," Moon went on hastily. "But though we're loyal to one another, we can't function as a true Pack."

"But you are their Alpha," pointed out the half wolf, a thoughtful gleam in his eye.

"Yes, and I have no desire to be one." Moon kept her voice steady. "I want to relinquish my leadership. My last act as its leader would be to submit my Pack to you. If you'll have us . . ." She licked her jaws, and lowered her eyes. ". . . Alpha."

There was such a long and heavy silence, she was afraid that the half wolf was going to refuse her. Moon was aware that Fiery was very still and tense, his muscles trembling slightly, and she realized he was holding his breath.

If the half wolf rejects us, I will accept that. I won't beg. I'll walk away with my Pack's pride intact. I don't know how we'll manage, how we'll survive, but we will leave with our heads held high.

Determinedly, Moon finally raised her eyes to the half wolf. He watched her a moment longer, then slid his gaze to Fiery. Finally, he looked back to Moon and nodded.

"Very well," he growled at last. "Work hard, obey my orders, and you are welcome in my Pack."

A wave of relief washed through Moon, making her almost dizzy. "We will. And thank you. *My Alpha.*"

There was a yelp of joy, and Fiery bounded forward. All of Moon’s nervousness and uncertainty melted into happiness as the huge dog shouldered the red Beta aside and hooked his head over Moon’s neck, nuzzling her and growling with delight.

“Welcome, Moon. To you and your Pack. You’ve made me happier than I can say.”

CHAPTER TEN

Blissfully, Moon stretched her paws, basking in the rays of the Sun-Dog, which warmed her fur. In her moments of relaxation she loved to watch the life of her new Pack bustling around her. Snap lay talking quietly to a lean chase-dog named Dart; Mulch was comparing hunting tactics with Twitch, who was demonstrating his techniques for pouncing despite his bad leg. Omega had been disappointed to find himself at the bottom of the ranks in this Pack, just as he'd been in the old one, but he had settled into his work anyway, although with a rather bad grace. Moon watched as he dragged the old bedding from Beta's den, his expression grumpy. *But then it always is,* she thought with reluctant fondness for the ugly little dog.

It had taken them several hard journeys of the Sun-Dog to reach this new territory, but it was a good one. Moon was surprised by how comfortable she felt, not just in the new land, but with her new Packmates. The sheltered valley felt like home already. The prey was plentiful, with rabbit warrens nearby and a forest that teemed with life. A freshwater stream ran within their boundaries to a broad, glittering lake; they would certainly never go thirsty.

I hope this will be our permanent home, Moon thought dreamily. *At least, I hope we can stay here as long as my old Pack lived in their territory. That was a good life. But this will be, too. I'm sure of it.*

The new Pack could never replace her family, and she still missed Star and her parent-dogs with a constant aching regret. But they were safe in the paws of the Earth-Dog, she knew; and this Pack was the next best thing.

Best of all, she was certain that her Mother-Dog and Father-Dog would have approved of her new mate. Fiery was

everything they had both admired in a dog: strong, courageous, kind. *I think if you could see me, Father-Dog, you wouldn't be sorry that I'm not with Hunter. I know you'd be glad I made the choice I did. . . .*

She blinked, sighing. As for her other choice . . .

Well, she had a feeling her Father-Dog would understand that, too. This wasn't what he'd planned for her, but it was what she'd wanted, and it was what suited her best. *I'm lead Patrol Dog. I have responsibilities, important ones. That's what matters. I don't have to be Alpha to serve my Pack.*

Moon's heart swelled with pride and happiness. *Yes, I think my Father-Dog and Mother-Dog would be very happy with me.*

And I'm happy too. Happier than ever, today . . .

She pricked her ears as she heard the sounds of the returning hunters. Jumping to her paws, she trotted eagerly to meet them. Fiery was in the lead as the four hunters padded into the clearing; his jaws were clamped around a fat squirrel, but he dropped it to greet Moon happily, licking her jaw and nuzzling her neck.

"Fiery," she murmured. "I'm glad you're back. The hunting was good, then?"

"Very good," he told her. "This is fine land, Moon."

"Spring looks a bit uneasy." Moon glanced over his shoulder, curious.

"Yes, but not about the hunting. She was complaining about some bad feeling in her fur. She says her bones are buzzing. I felt it myself, but it's nothing. The air feels a little strange, that's all. I think maybe there's a big storm coming, but it's nothing to worry about."

"I'm not worried." Moon couldn't help panting with happiness, and her tongue lolled with joy. "Fiery, I've got something to tell you."

Instantly, he was all concern. "What is it, Moon? Is everything all right?"

“Everything’s better than all right,” she told him softly. *Oh, I wanted to prepare him more for the news, but if I don’t tell him, I’ll burst.* “We’re going to have pups.”

Fiery jolted back so that he could stare into her eyes. He looked utterly startled, but his jaws opened in a broad grin. “Moon! Really?”

“Really.” She turned her head to nuzzle her flank. “I was hopeful yesterday, but now I’m certain. You’re going to be a Father-Dog, my love!”

He gave a howl of delight, then fell to licking her ears and nose with enthusiasm. “Moon, this is wonderful! I’ll take good care of you, you’ll see. I’ll protect you through this storm, I’ll find you the best prey, I’ll—”

She laughed, nuzzling him as they walked together back to their den. “I know you will. And you’re going to be a wonderful Father-Dog, I know that too.”

I thought I would never be happy again, she thought to herself. *Back when I was sick, and my Packmates were dying, I thought there was nothing left that I could live for.*

How could I have been more wrong? I’m happier now than I’ve ever been.

“You have time to rest before prey-sharing,” Fiery told her.

“Are you comfortable, Moon? Are you warm enough? Can I —”

“I’m fine,” she laughed gently. “I couldn’t be better, Fiery.”

As they settled in the den, Moon nestled against Fiery, feeling his warm heartbeat through her flank.

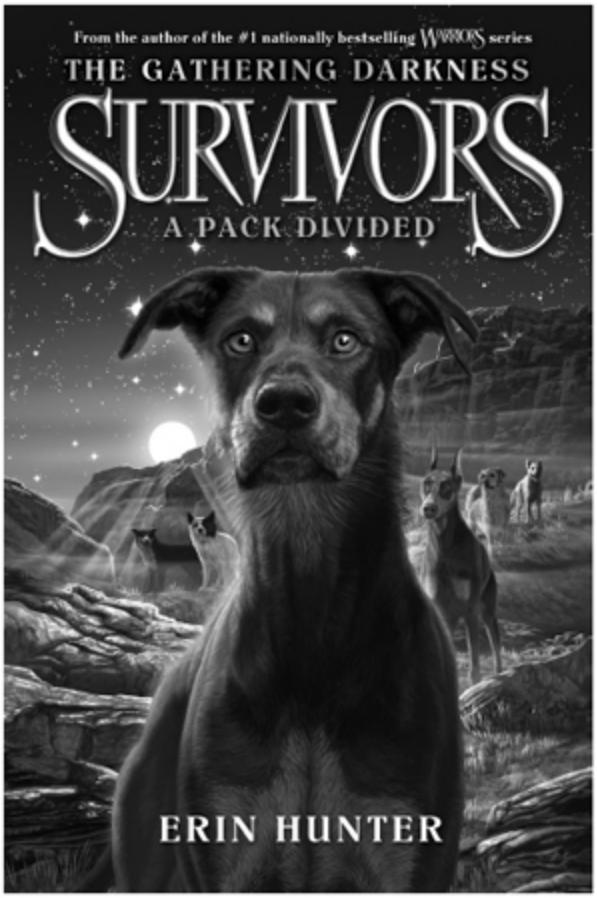
Everything will be good from now on, she thought. *Some mysterious prickling in Spring’s hide and bones can’t change that. If there’s a storm coming, however big, we’ll survive it. We can survive anything together, Fiery and I . . . and our pups.*

She closed her eyes, feeling happiness wash over her in a warm tide.

The worst is definitely over.

Excerpt from *Survivors: The Gathering Darkness #1: A Pack Divided*

A NEW ADVENTURE BEGINS
FOR THE SURVIVORS DOGS



KEEP READING FOR A SNEAK PEEK!

CHAPTER ONE

Pausing as she stepped out of the forest's shade, Storm took a moment to stretch her paws and her back, and to claw the ground blissfully in the rays of the morning Sun-Dog. His light shone warm on her sleek back and, in the rippling grass around her, he kindled rich scents of rabbits, mice, and squirrels. Storm sniffed appreciatively at the soft breeze. There were good prospects for their hunting patrol.

Storm felt full of optimism on this glittering New Leaf day. It was her first chance to be in charge of a hunt, and she was proud that her Pack Beta, Lucky, had shown such faith in her. *He always has,* she thought gratefully. She owed so much to the golden-furred Beta who had once been a Lone Dog.

She glanced over her shoulder at the team she was leading. *Some of the Pack's best dogs,* she thought with pride. Snap, who had long been part of Sweet's Pack, had always been a fine hunter, and Mickey, despite his Leashed Dog origins, had learned to track down prey with the best of the Wild Dogs. Arrow the Fierce Dog had been one of Blade's Pack, and his focus, discipline, and deadly accuracy were invaluable assets. And Whisper, who had been one of the mad dog Terror's underlings . . . well, he was extra keen to please his leaders and prove his worth, now that he wasn't cowed by Terror's horrible threats.

They were an unlikely combination, but that was what made Storm happiest. Before her own birth, the Earth-Dog had shaken in the Big Growl. If that had never happened, the Packs represented in her hunting party would never have come together as one. After all, Mickey and Snap had come from very different circumstances—Snap from Sweet's Pack, which had once been the half wolf's Pack; and Mickey

from his home with longpaws—but that was before the Big Growl had destroyed the city, changed the world, and forced every dog to fend for himself. Now they all worked together despite their differences, all of them bringing their own strengths and skills to their new, united Pack.

Storm had never quite understood why Lucky was always barking back to the Big Growl. Yet now that she had lived through a great battle—the one they called the Storm of Dogs— she saw clearly why the disaster of the Growl meant so much to him. When a dog had lived through such a world-changing shock, it did affect everything: the world beneath her paws, the scents in her nostrils, each sound that reached her pricked ears. Everything held new significance—and not just potential threat and unexpected danger, but fresh possibilities, too.

Prey had been thin and hard to catch throughout the long Ice Wind season, but now buds were popping into life on the trees, small leaves grew thick on the bushes and shrubs, and the meadows were green with new life. Storm was determined that today's hunt would be swift and successful. "Try that hollow, Storm." Mickey's kind voice was in her pricked ear, and it set her fangs instantly on edge. He and Snap had been trying to advise and guide her all morning, when it was Storm herself who needed to make the decisions. Couldn't Mickey understand that?

"There, see?" the black-and-white Farm Dog went on, oblivious as Storm ground her jaws in frustration. "The hollow beyond the hill." He nodded in the direction of the far side of the shallow valley, toward a dip in the grassy ground circled by young birch saplings.

"Yes, that might be worth a try," Storm managed to growl.

"We can surround it easily and drive out the prey," Mickey went on. "The creek runs close to it, and there's a rabbit warren there."

"I know that, Mickey," said Storm sharply.

Mickey pricked his ears in surprise, then licked his jaws. “Did I say something wrong, Storm?”

“It’s just that—” Noticing the slight hurt on his face, she softened, and gave her old friend a lick. “Sorry, Mickey. I’m just a bit preoccupied.”

He was only trying to be helpful, after all—and Mickey, along with Lucky, had been one of the dogs who had rescued her and her two littermates when they were helpless, abandoned pups. He’d always looked out for her.

But I want to be able to prove myself. *If they’ll let me . . .*

Snap was the next to trot over and push her narrow snout in. “I’m not sure about those high trees, Storm.” Her head tilted as she stared at the horizon. “Rabbits could duck around them, and we’d be blocked at several points.”

Storm somehow managed to hold on to her temper, though the urge simply to run and hunt was growing unbearable. Her paw pads ached, as if she’d been walking over rough stone, and she wanted to be moving now, not standing still. She could already see distant tawny flashes through the grass. The unwary creatures weren’t alarmed—yet—but the dogs would have to move quickly once they were nearer to the warren.

“I think we can cope with the trees, Snap,” Storm told her in a low voice. “Let’s head toward the hollow, but keep our noses sharp for other prey on the way. We can’t rely on catching enough rabbits for every dog.”

She reminded herself sternly that Snap and Mickey were her seniors in the Pack hierarchy. *Though I wish they didn’t treat me as if I’m still that vulnerable pup Mickey and Lucky rescued.* She gave a silent inward sigh, then nodded at her patrol.

“I want to plan ahead of time, so that we don’t have to make a sound later. Arrow and Snap, when we’re closer to the warren, you circle around toward the creek. If the rest of us take points between the warren and the wider plain, the rabbits will have nowhere to go. We should manage to take

two or three. Stay low, and remember to watch for other prey.” With a nod that Storm hoped showed both respect and quiet authority, she led the patrol carefully toward the line of aspens on the horizon.

All the dogs were alert now, placing their paw pads with care and keeping their bodies low, but Whisper slipped past the others to stalk at Storm’s side. She gave the young dog an inquisitive glance.

“I think this is a brilliant strategy, Storm,” said Whisper, in a low but enthusiastic growl. “You’re a great hunt leader!”

“Thanks, Whisper,” Storm told him, pricking her ears in slight surprise. “I’d really like to lead the hunt more often, so let’s hope this goes well.”

“Oh, I’m sure it will. So what else do you think we’ll find? Maybe a deer!”

Storm gave a huffing sound of amusement, and shook her head briefly. “I doubt we’ll be that lucky, but let’s stay alert.”

“You always do,” said Whisper. There was a light of adoration in the gray dog’s eyes, and Storm looked away, trying to keep her focus on the careful stalk-and-slink of the hunt.

A ripple of unease traveled between her fur and her skin. Whisper had treated her with something close to hero-worship ever since Storm had killed Blade, the Fierce Dogs’ vicious leader, in the great battle last Ice Wind. Storm had had to do it—and she’d been glad to do it, after all that Blade had done to her litter-siblings and to her Packmates—but the days of battle were over. She was a hunter now.

She hoped Whisper wouldn’t always be bringing up the dreadful Storm of Dogs, and Storm’s role in it. They had a new life to look forward to now, and Storm was determined to play her part in making it one of peace and plenty for the Pack. It had taken her so much time and effort to live down her reputation as a savage Fierce Dog, a struggle made far

harder by the hostility of their old half-wolf leader, Alpha. She didn't want to have to go through all of that again.

Storm raised her muzzle to test the wind direction, pausing with one paw lifted.

Forest-Dog, if you'll listen to me as you listen to Lucky, grant us good New-Leaf prey today!

Her optimism returned as she leaped easily over a small tributary of the stream, enjoying the sleek movement of her muscles and the springiness of the earth beneath her paws. Every sense in her body felt awake after the long, hard Ice Wind, and a slight flash of movement at the corner of her eye sent her twisting in pursuit almost without a thought.

The squirrel shot up the trunk of a tree, panicked, but Storm's snapping jaws found their target. Crunching down, she felt the brittle bones of its body through the scrawny flesh. *Skinny,* she thought, *even for a squirrel. Ice Wind has been hard for every creature.*

Her swift kill, she realized, had served as a signal to the others: the hunters bolted into the chase. Arrow sprinted across a dry streambed, sniffing and searching without luck, but Mickey and Snap began to work together at the foot of a gnarled oak, digging in showers of earth until their paws and muzzles were filthy. Just as Storm bounded to join them, they unearthed a nest of mice. As the tiny creatures skittered in panic, blinded by the light, the two hunters pounced and bit and snapped till they'd created a pile of tiny corpses.

"They're barely a mouthful each," said Snap, pawing at them.

"Every mouthful feeds the Pack," Storm reminded her, pleased. "Well done!"

Her praise, though, seemed to fly straight above Snap's head. The tan-and-white dog pressed her head to Mickey's, and for a moment the two successful hunters rested, panting, rubbing their muzzles affectionately together and

licking each other's dirty ears. With a surprised prick of her own ears, Storm took a few paces backward.

Is this really the moment for snuggling up to your mate? she thought with a shiver of puzzled distaste. *What a silly waste of time. It's only a couple of mice, for the Sky-Dogs' sake.*

Turning her rump on them, she snatched up her squirrel and dropped it into the hole Mickey and Snap had dug out at the base of the oak. It was as good a place as any to store their prey till they'd finished their hunt: a deep gap between two thick roots. As she raised her head, a light, warm breeze moved through the trees, bringing with it that tantalizing scent of rabbit. Storm shook off her moment of discomfort. *We're downwind of the prey—this is a good beginning!*

Excitement rose in her once again, and she gave a low commanding growl to summon the others. She felt a spark of pride, swelling to a warm glow, when they answered her call at once. The four dogs fell in at her flanks and followed her lead as she prowled forward, closer and closer to the shallow bowl of land.

The rabbits must be hungry after the long cold, Storm realized: they had still not noticed the patrol's approach. They were too busy browsing and tearing at the new grass with their blunt little teeth. *We should be able to cut them off from their burrows*, thought Storm, *if we all play our part.* Her heart beat fast in her rib cage with anticipation.

Lowering her sleek body still closer to the earth, she crept forward, nodding to the others. They were all in place, just as she'd directed them; again she felt that frisson of satisfaction in her leadership. When she finally sprang, hurtling into the hollow, every nerve in her body sang with the joy of hunting, with the certainty of her own speed and strength and skill. She felt her blood racing, the flex and stretch of each muscle as she dived and dodged and leaped in pursuit of the terrified rabbits. It was like pure energy and

fire running through her. *Is this how Lightning of the Sky-Dogs feels?*

And it was working just as it should. White bobtails flickered all around the hollow, and the panicked creatures were scattering straight into the jaws of the waiting hunters. Mickey's powerful teeth clamped down on one of them, and he shook it violently as another doubled back and fled from him—straight into the jaws of Storm. Panting, Storm flung down its limp corpse, then took a moment to watch as Whisper drove the fattest rabbit of all toward the waiting Arrow.

Arrow was loping along on exactly the right line, and Storm could see he would intercept the fleeing rabbit with ease. So she was stunned to see Whisper's head flick to the side. Mid-stride, he veered away slightly and herded the rabbit in a different direction, toward Snap.

But Snap wasn't watching; she was too busy chasing down a dark-furred rabbit of her own. Whisper's rabbit crossed her field of vision just as she was about to pounce on hers, and Snap's pace faltered in surprise and confusion.

Arrow was racing furiously after the rabbit now, but the abrupt change of tactics had spoiled his line and his focus. Both rabbits, the dark-furred one and the lighter one Whisper had been driving, bolted straight between Arrow and Snap, and vanished into their burrows with a flash of two white tails.

Storm raced toward them, but she knew she was already too late. Skidding to a halt in a flurry of sandy earth, she stared at the dark burrow entrances, swamped by frustration and anger. Behind her Arrow and Snap had drawn up too, snapping their drooling, empty jaws.

As Whisper bounded to a faltering, shamed halt between them, Storm turned on him.

"Why did you do that?" she barked furiously. "We lost two good rabbits!" *And more*, she realized. In the confusion of

Whisper’s mangled hunting attempt, several other rabbits had reached the safety of their warren.

“That was the fattest rabbit!” added Arrow in an angry snarl. “Those two would have fed three dogs between them!”

“What were you thinking? Were you thinking *at all*?” Storm laid her ears back and growled furiously at Whisper.

The dog ducked his head, lowering his forequarters and shuffling forward, his tail clamped down tight. He looked as if he wanted to sink right through the earth and join the rabbits underground.

“I’m sorry, Storm,” he whined miserably, blinking and flattening his ears. “I didn’t mean to . . . I thought . . . I just meant . . .”

Storm gave her head a violent shake. “*What*? What did you mean?”

“I—” Whisper’s glance flicked quickly toward Arrow, then back to the ground.

“Don’t be hard on him, Storm.” Snap took a pace forward, and nodded at the unhappy Whisper.

Storm turned to her, surprised at the hunt dog’s tolerance. “He spoiled your hunt too, Snap.”

“Look, Storm, it’s obvious.” Snap tilted her head and sat down, curling her tail around her haunches. “Whisper was nervous of Arrow. He doesn’t like hunting with him, and to be honest? I understand why. I don’t blame Whisper.”

Storm stared at Snap’s cool expression, her jaw loose. “What?”

“After all we went through with the Fierce Dogs, it’s hard for us to trust any of them.” Snap hunched her thin shoulders. “I know Arrow’s in our Pack now, but it’s hard to treat him as a true Packmate.”

Not knowing what to say to that, Storm turned to Arrow. His short black fur bristled along his shoulders and spine, and resentment oozed from him, but the Fierce Dog said nothing. He licked his jaws angrily, and looked away. Then

he padded across to one of the dead rabbits, picked it up in his powerful jaws and paced in the other direction.

And what do I do now? Snap wasn't being fair, and this felt so wrong to Storm. *Just when I was thinking how good it was that we were united, that members of all Packs were working together.*

But if she spoke up for Arrow, Snap would think she was only siding with her fellow Fierce Dog. She might even accuse Storm openly of favoring her own kind, of being Fierce Dog to her core. *What might she say aloud—that I'm ruled by my bad blood?*

"You all trust me," she said at last, staring at her Packmates. Snap, Mickey, and Whisper looked so resolute, and Storm's head spun with confusion. "You trust me, and I'm a Fierce Dog too. Just like Arrow!"

Mickey caught Snap's eye, and Storm saw a look pass between them, one that she couldn't quite read. Snap's ear flicked once, dismissively. Then, tentatively, Whisper gave a soft growl.

"You're not like Arrow," he mumbled. "You're different." He glanced at Snap and Mickey. "Storm's different, isn't that right? She killed Blade!"

Storm stared at him, open-jawed. With a crawling sense of horror, she realized that Whisper's eyes were fixed on her again, worshipful.

She shook herself, dumbfounded. "Let's gather the prey," she told them. "What there is of it." Gazing dismally at the pitiful haul of rabbits, she felt a crushing sense of disappointment. Her hopes had been so high for her first time as hunt leader. "We'll try another spot before we return to the camp, but we'll have to go some distance. All the prey around here will have heard us by now."

"Of course, Storm." Whisper got quickly to his paws and trotted after her like a devoted pup.

As she led the small patrol farther from the cliffs and the Endless Lake, heading for a far belt of pines, Storm's

stomach squirmed and her fur prickled. She'd begun this hunt with such high hopes and excitement, yet now they were returning with a poor prey-haul—and a bunch of dogs who didn't, after all, want to work together as her perfect team.

Is that terrible battle the only thing they care about? If I hadn't killed Blade, would they trust me at all? Or would I be just another Arrow—alone in a Pack that thinks I'm the enemy?

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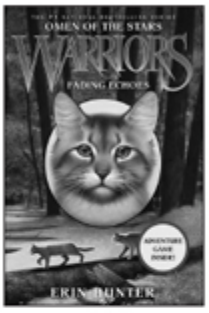

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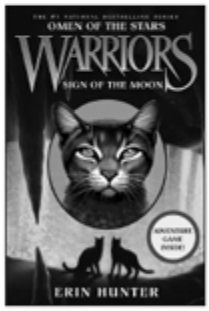

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ERIN HUNTER is inspired by a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. As well as having great respect for nature in all its forms, Erin enjoys creating rich mythical explanations for animal behavior. She is also the author of the bestselling Warriors and Seekers series.

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